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Ch. 1

Sagekit. Where was Sagekit? Heartstorm blinked open his eyes. He adjusted to the gloom and it hit him... Sagekit was dead. He slumped down again. But Sagekit was alright. He was happy. He was with Brightheart, Heartstorm's mother.

"Heartstorm, are you feeling better?" came a rough voice. Frogleap, the RiverClan medicine cat.

"Heartstorm is pouting," came a taunting voice. Heartstorm's head snapped up and he glared at the sleek tortoise shelled she cat in the corner of the den. Cinderstar. She regarded him mockingly. Heartstorm leapt to his feet and without really thinking, he threw himself at her. Eelfrost, who had been guarding Cinderstar didn't make a move to help her. Heartstorm unsheathed his claws and started clawing at Cinderstar. Her eyes were open in surprise and she threw him off. She hissed. Blood ran down her sides. Heartstorm stared at her in satisfaction. It felt good, to let out his anger. Frogleap leapt in the middle of both of them.

"What are you doing Heartstorm?" he cried in exasperation. "I get it you just woke up after Sagekit's death but come on! I don't want to waste my herbs on *her*." Cinderstar, the ShadowClan leader, regarded Frogleap with disdain.

"Then don't. Let her bleed till she dies," spat Heartstorm. Eelfrost watched Heartstorm from the corner, looking gleeful. He flashed a grin at Heartstorm.

"Well now, that's not very nice," pouted Cinderstar.

"Shut up," snapped Heartstorm, Frogleap and Eelfrost at the same time. Frogleap sighed.

"Heartstorm, you need to rest. And calm down," Frogleap muttered.

"Nah, I think Heartstorm's back to his old self," grinned Eelfrost. Heartstorm flashed a tired smile at Eelfrost.

"Your kit just died. I understand that you're feeling.... disorientated," Frogleap said. "But-"

"His kit just died?" exclaimed Cinderstar gleefully. "Which one? Oooh I bet it was Sagekit. He was so weak, wasn't he?" Heartstorm lashed his tail and his fur rose. This was not something he could tolerate. Frogleap tried to block him but this time, Heartstorm was not being stopped. He dodged Frogleap and bit Cinderstar in the shoulder. She howled and started to bat him away but he twisted around and clawed at her back. She twisted to bite him on the ear and he let go of his bite. And bit her on the neck.

"Heartstorm!" croaked Eelfrost in surprise. Cinderstar collapsed to the ground. Eelfrost pulled Heartstorm away. Heartstorm backed away, panting. Frogleap's eyes went wide and he started searching for herbs. Cinderstar lay limp on the ground, blood pouring from her sides and her bite on the neck.

"I should've killed her," hissed Heartstorm under his breath. "She deserved it."

"I know she did," Eelfrost said, staring at Cinderstar and Heartstorm in surprise. "And when I said all those times I'd kill her if I could, I never thought you'd *actually* try." Heartstorm glanced at his best friend. Eelfrost looked more impressed than disgusted. Nobody in RiverClan liked Cinderstar.

"I mean, if she dies, she won't really be a loss," shrugged Eelfrost as Frogleap busied himself trying to stop the bleeding. "We could throw a party! I know everybody would celebrate her death!"

"Even ShadowClan," Heartstorm added.

"Even ShadowClan," agreed Eelfrost.

"She's not going to die," Frogleap growled, rolling his eyes. Eelfrost groaned.

"Aw, come on," he said, devastated. Heartstorm smiled.

"Ugh, both of you, get out," Frogleap ordered.

"But I thought I needed rest," put in Heartstorm.

"Get out. You seem just fine if you can almost kill another cat," retorted Frogleap but he did seem slightly amused. Heartstorm and Eelfrost padded out of the den. Eelfrost immediately turned serious.

"I'm sorry, about Sagekit," he said.

"It's ok," sighed Heartstorm. "I saw him. In StarClan. He's happier than he'd ever be in RiverClan." Eelfrost nodded in understanding. They headed for the nursery. Heartstorm needed to tell everything he had seen in the dream to Silverdrop, his mate. He knew Silverdrop would be devastated and he really needed her company right then.

"Are Brightkit and Bumblekit coping alright?" asked Eelfrost. Heartstorm hadn't seen them since he had fainted when Sagekit had died. He shrugged guiltily. Eelfrost let Heartstorm go into the nursery without him. Heartstorm padded to Silverdrop's side, past Acornheart, Daisykit and Heatherkit, sleeping. Silverdrop looked up, her eyes sad. Bumblekit and Brightkit lay by her side, not saying a word.

"Hey," Heartstorm said softly. He lay down beside Silverdrop. She gave him a loving lick on the head. Heartstorm smiled at her sadly and bent down to his two kits. Bumblekit and Brightkit, both one moon old, looked up at Heartstorm. He gave each of them a loving lick.

"I saw Sagekit last night. I went to StarClan," Heartstorm said to Silverdrop and his kits. "And Sagekit was there. He was happy. Really happy. He could run about. Hunt, fish, climb. Nothing could stop him. He's happy now." Bumblekit nodded.

"Tell him I said hi," Bumblekit murmured.

"Me too," Brightkit added.

"Of course, the next time I got to StarClan, I'll tell him.

He said he'd hunt a pigeon for both of you," Heartstorm told them gently. Brightkit and Bumblekit smiled and turned to suckle for milk.

"Did you really?" whispered Silverdrop sadly.

"I did, really," Heartstorm replied. "I saw Sagekit and Brightheart. Brightheart's taking care of him. He's really happy Silverdrop. Trust me." Silverdrop looked down.

"I trust you," she whispered. "It's just, he's happy, without us."

"He doesn't think of it that way," Heartstorm said. "You should have see him." Silverdrop nodded.

"He'd want us to be happy as well, wouldn't he?" she said sadly.

"He would," nodded Heartstorm. "He really would."

"Then we should do it, for him," Silverdrop said. "Kits, Sagekit would have wanted us to be happy, ok? So we will make him proud. Whenever you're going to achieve something or something good happens, think of Sagekit." Brightkit and Bumblekit nodded.

"You know, if ever you need to talk to him, you can, he can see you from up there," Heartstorm said. "And hear you."

"Really?" asked Bumblekit. He looked up at the ceiling of the nursery. "Hi Sagekit. We miss you. We hope you're having fun and thanks for catching a pigeon for me and Brightkit." Silverdrop smiled and Heartstorm felt his heart melt.

"Yeah thanks Sagekit. We love you," Brightkit said. Heatherkit and Daisykit had awoken and were staring at Bumblekit and Brightkit.

"Who are you talking to?" they asked, their eyes raised. Acornheart frowned.

"don't be rude," she warned them.

"Sagekit is dead. He can't hear you," said Daisykit. Heatherkit frowned at her sister but didn't say anything. Brightkit growled and before Heartstorm or Silverdrop could say anything, she advanced.

"Heartstorm just saw Sagekit last night. In StarClan. And Sagekit was hunting, fishing and climbing which is better than what you could ever do!" snapped Brightkit angrily. She lashed her small tail and stumbled back towards Heartstorm and Silverdrop. Heartstorm smiled at Brightkit and picked her up, setting her down between, himself and Silverdrop.

"Well said," Heartstorm whispered into Brightkit's ear. Silverdrop gave Heartstorm a stern look but looked pleased with Brightkit as well. They huddled together. Heartstorm felt a warm tingling feeling. They were still a family.

Ch. 2

"Please?" begged Brightkit.

"Yeah *please* Silverdrop?" echoed Bumblekit.

"Pretty please?" added Brightkit.

"Come on Silverdrop," Heartstorm put in. "It'll be fine." Silverdrop glared at Heartstorm.

"You're supposed to be on my side," she muttered under her breath but finally sighed. "Alright. But you stay with Heartstorm and you are not allowed to get in trouble. Understood? Or you're grounded till you both become apprentices." Brightkit and Bumblekit cried in excitement and nodded their heads vigorously. Heartstorm grinned.

"Thanks Mum!" chorused both kits before racing towards the nursery entrance. Silverdrop sighed.

"It was just yesterday they were so small they couldn't even open their eyes," Silverdrop said then she heard Bumblekit cry out in happiness. "Go! watch them." Heartstorm hurried outside where the kits were running about, looking at the camp for the first time in their life. Heartstorm smiled.

"Do you want to go to the stream?" asked Heartstorm. Brightkit and Bumblkit nodded happily. Heartstorm led them towards the stream. The cold water trickled gently past. Brightkit watched, mesmerised while Bumblekit stared into the water at his reflection.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Your reflection," explained Heartstorm.

"Can we go in?" asked Brightkit. "I didn't know camp was so big!" Heartstorm chuckled.

"You can put one paw in. Be careful, it's cold," Heartstorm warned. Brightkit plunged a paw into the water and quickly jumped back.

"Woah," she gasped. "It is cold!"

"Can I try? Can I try? Can I try?" asked Bumblekit excitedly.

"Of course," laughed Heartstorm. Brightkit watched curiously as Bumblekit plunged both of his feet into the water. His eyes went wide.

"It's so cold!" he exclaimed and quickly leapt out. He rolled into Brightkit and they began to wrestle. Heartstorm smiled proudly. Eelfrost ducked under some brambles and appeared, grinning at Heartstorm.

"First time they're out?" he asked. Heartstorm nodded. Brightkit and Bumblekit finished their fight temporarily and both scrambled towards Eelfrost. Brightkit sprang at Eelfrost's tail. He laughed. Bumblekit even tried to clamber onto Eelfrost's back.

"Hey," came a voice and Deerflame appeared. She laid her eyes on the kits. "Omigosh! They're so cute!" Brightkit and Bumlekit changed their direction and attention to Deerflame and started to scrambled towards Deerflame. Bumblekit tugged at her tail and Brightkit leapt at Deerflame's face. She laughed and pretended to be a fox for them. Eelfrost sat beside Heartstorm, watching the kits in amusement. Finally Deerflame collapsed beside Eelfrost and laughed.

"Wow, that was very tiring," she said. The kits amused themselves by running around a bramble bush since they had never seen one before.

"It's their first time going out, isn't it?" asked Deerflame.

"Yup. Silverdrop was all worked up about it. But we managed to convince her," Heartstorm said.

"I hope I get to mentor them," whispered Eelfrost.

Heartstorm tiled his head, gazing at Heartstorm.

"You'd be a great mentor. I'd be happy to have you mentor my kits," smiled Heartstorm. Eelfrost chuckled.

"Aw, you're too nice. But I probably won't be chosen. It'll be Greyspeck or something," Eelfrost sighed.

"Thornstar asked me about mentoring Daisykit or Heatherkit along with Greyspeck," Deerflame put in. "So... you still have a chance to mentor Brightkit or Bumblekit."

"I bet it'll be Rainfeather then...," sighed Eelfrost.

"I'll talk to Thornstar about it then," smiled Heartstorm. "And Silverdrop." He added as an after thought.

"So who did you say you wanted to mentor?" asked Heartstorm.

"Well, Greyspeck said Heatherkit first. So I chose Daisykit," Deerflame said. "I mean, I don't mind. I'm sure Daisykit will be a great apprentice."

"I know she will be," Heartstorm nodded.

"So when are your kits becoming apprentices?" asked Eelfrost.

"Four moons and a half," Heartstorm said.

"Wow, they grow up really fast," Deerflame gasped. Brightkit returned to Heartstorm and settled down in his warm fur, looking tired. Bumblekit was staring at some leaves.

"They're so pretty," he was mumbling. "I wonder what they could be used for."

"Nothing, probably," Eelfrost said loudly. Bumblekit turned to Eelfrost.

"How do you know?" he asked, cocking his head.

"They're bramble leaves," pointed out Eelfrost. "What can they be used for?"

"Maybe Frogleap knows," Deerflame suggested.

"Who cares?" interrupted Eelfrost and although Heartstorm gave Eelfrost a stern look, he totally agreed with Eelfrost. He turned to Bumblekit with a smile.

"Why don't we go ask him?" asked Heartstorm.

"Sure," smiled Bumblekit. Heartstorm picked Brightkit up and walked towards the medicine den with Bumblekit in tow. Heartstorm stopped right before the den. He remembered Cinderstar was there.

"Ah, there is going to be a er, cat," Heartstorm. "Inside."

"We know. It's Frogleap. The medicine cat," Bumblekit said.

"Well, no it's Cinderstar actually. She's er, the leader of ShadowClan. Well former leader," Heartstorm said, having trouble to explain.

"ShadowClan?" frowned Brightkit. "But we're RiverClan!" she lashed her tail. "What is Cinderstar doing in our territory?"

"She's been, er, thrown out of ShadowClan," Heartstorm said. "Just ignore her. Everything she says are lies, alright?" Bumblekit and Brightkit nodded and they entered the den. It was dimly lit as always and Softcry was sitting, watching Cinderstar, a small bundle on the ground. Softcry turned to Heartstorm with a smile.

"Hey," she said. "Oh hello there Brightkit, Bumblekit."

"hi!" piped in Brightkit. "Who are you?"

"I think you know Eelfrost. I'm his mother, Softcry," Softcry smiled.

"Hi Softcry," Brightkit said. Heartstorm was glad that Cinderstar seemed to be sleeping, her wounds he had given her still healing. Bumblekit had advanced to peer at the herbs arranged neatly. He sniffed at them, inspecting each. Frogleap bustled in.

"Hello Heartstorm," he said. "Are you going to bring trouble?" Brightkit looked up.

"Oh, helloe there Brightkit. And Bumblekit. Don't touch those herbs!" Frogleap said. Bumblekit backed away from the herbs. "What do you need?"

"Bumblekit wanted to ask you a question," Heartstorm told Frogleap.

"Ah, what is it, little one?" Frogleap asked gently, bending down. Bumblekit shuffled his feet.

"What can we use bramble leaves for?" he asked shyly.

"Ah bramble leaves," Frogleap said thoughtfully. "... Nothing."

"Sorry?" frowned Bumblekit.

"They're not used for anything," repeated Frogleap. Heartstorm stifled a laugh. So Eelfrost had been right. Bumblekit nodded and thanked Frogleap.

"Right, let's not disturb Frogleap. Say thank you," Heartstorm said, backing out of the den. Brightkit said thank you and trotted after Bumblekit. Bumblekit nodded to Frogleap and followed his sister. As he left, Frogleap gazed at him in a weird way but before Heartstorm' could think what, Frogleap turned away and Brightkit was scampering towards the nursery. Heartstorm led Bumblekit towards the nursery where they joined Silverdrop. Brightkit was talking excitedly about all that had happened and Bumblekit looked silent and thoughtful. Heartstorm felt a stab of worry. Was Bumblekit sick?

"Don't worry about me Heartstorm," assured Bumblekit, seeing Heartstorm's face. "I was just thinking." Heartstorm nodded

and settled down beside Silverdrop.

"How was your first time out of the nursery?" asked Silverdrop.

"Good," Bumblekit said. "I learnt something."

"Oh! What is it?" asked Silverdrop with a small smile.

"Bramble leaves are not used for anything," Bumblekit said proudly. Brightkit raised her eyesbrows. Heartstorm gave a small chuckle.

"Ah, that's great," Silverdrop said slowly and gave Bumblekit a funny look.

Ch. 3

Heartstorm had not guarded Cinderstar for a whole quarter moon. Reedpelt had said it was because Frogleap said that Heartstorm couldn't be trusted near Cinderstar. Heartstorm though, was very relieved. He had more time to spend with Silverdrop and his kits. Silverdrop said she felt good enough to walk around camp now and Frogleap approved. So together they walked towards the elder den as Brightkit had asked.

"Is Pigeonfeather really in the elders den when he isn't even old?" asked Brightkit excitedly.

"Yes," sighed Heartstorm. "But he's was a very good warrior." Silverdrop smiled kindly.

"Is Floodwhisker nice?" asked Bumblekit.

"Of course he is," assured Silverdrop. They passed a few bushes and lounging int he sun was Floodwhisker and Pigeonfeather. Pigeonfeather beamed at the kits.

"And this must be Brightkit," Pigeonfeather said, looking at Brightkit who ambled up to him to stare at him. "And you must be Bumblekit. I see the resemblance to your father. Silverdrop's told me a lot about both of you."

"Do you mind if we leave them with you for a while?" asked Silverdrop. Pigeonfeather nodded.

"Of course," he exclaimed. Heartstorm and Silverdrop thanked him. Heartstorm bent down in front of Brightkit. She was more likely to cause trouble.

"Don't be rude, understand?" Heartstorm said sternly but lovingly. Brightkit nodded. "And do as Pigeonfeather and Floodwhisker say." Brightkit nodded once more. Silverdrop licked both kits goodbye and they slipped away.

"They're more than a moon old now and they're old enough to eat real prey. Brightkit has been bugging me about it," Silverdrop said. Heartstorm agreed.

"They'll be so excited when we tell them," Heartstorm grinned.

"I know," smiled Silverdrop.

"Tonight, instead of them drinking milk I'll give them a mouse or something," Silverdrop said.

"Brightkit is going to love it. She keeps complaining that Heatherkit and Daisykit can eat *real* food but she can't," chuckled Heartstorm fondly.

"It's been a long time since we've gone on a walk, just us," Silverdrop said blissfully. They headed for the camp entrance but Heartstorm stopped.

"Are you sure you can go out?" Heartstorm said worriedly.

"You heard Frogleap," replied Silverdrop sternly. "Let's go." Heartstorm sighed and followed Silverdrop out of camp. Silverdrop trotted about happily even if the air was frosty and their breath turned into silvery mist. Heartstorm fluffed up his fur and followed Silverdrop through the forest.

"One night we should let Acornheart take care of the kits and we can go out for a walk at night. To the hill. Like we used to," Silverdrop said. Heartstorm smiled at those memories. Their first meeting at the hill hadn't gone too well but Heartstorm found he missed his nightly strolls with Silverdrop.

"Yeah, that'd be great," smiled Heartstorm. "Brightkit would be happy we're finally treating her like an *adult*."

"Is Cinderstar getting better?" asked Silverdrop.

"Huh?" frowned Heartstorm.

"You bit her on the neck. Gave her quite a thrashing, according to Eelfrost," Silverdrop said.

"Oh yeah. I don't really know. Haven't been in the medicine den. Only been right outside when Bumblekit wants to visit Frogleap. I don't like going in and seeing Cinderstar," shrugged Heartsorm.

"Heartstorm," Silverdrop said in exasperation. "You've got to see her. I mean, don't you want to know if she's improving?"

"Not really," Heartstorm said truthfully. Silverdrop rolled her eyes but smiled.

"And you let Bumblekit go into the medicine den alone?" Silverdrop asked.

"There's always somebody guarding Cinderstar and Frogleap's there too," Heartstorm said. "Bumblekit can manage." Silverdrop sighed. They walked in silence, both thinking about Sagekit.

"I wonder what Sagekit would have thought...," Silverdrop murmured.

"What do you mean?" asked Heartstorm. The image of Sagekit's small limp body flashed in his mind and a wave of sadness threatened to wash through him.

"I mean, about growing up. About going out of the nursery, about eating real food, about seeing the elders, about Cinderstar, about the medicine den. About everything," Silverdrop said, her eyes sad. "I miss him so much." Heartstorm hung his head.

"Me too," he whispered. Suddenly, Sparkbelly burst out of the bushes. He smiled at Heartstorm and Silverdrop.

"Ooh the lovebirds out for a walk," he cooed. Silverdrop raised an eyebrow and didn't look very impressed.

"Hey, Sparkbelly," grinned Heartstorm.

"There's a Gathering tonight, you going?" he asked.

"Dunno, Thornstar hasn't said yet," shrugged Heartstorm. Sparkbelly peered at Silverdrop.

"When will he chose you? You never go," Sparkbelly said. Silverdrop didn't answer. She padded away.

"She doesn't want to," defended Heartstorm. "I don't think I want to go tonight. If Thornstar says I'm going, I'll tell him to replace me. I wanna spend some time with Silverdrop... and the kits."

"Oh yes, of course, the kits," Sparkbelly nodded. "Well, see you guys then." He beamed and trotted away. Silverdrop gave Heartstorm a questioning look.

"What's with him?" she asked.

"He's always like that," shrugged Heartstorm in amusement. "We should get back." Silverdrop nodded and they headed back to camp. Before picking their kits up from the elder's den, Silverdrop chose a plump moue from the fresh-kill pile and they headed towards the elder's den. Bumblekit was lying on the ground, staring at a ladybug while Brightkit was looking mesmerised by a story old Floodwhisker was telling. Pigeonfeather smiled at Hearststorm and Silverdrop. Bumblekit leapt to his feet and stumbled towards them.

"Hi Mum. Hi Dad," he grinned.

"Hey Bumblekit," smiled Heartstorm. Silverdrop dropped the mouse.

"And I was trapped. There was nowhere to go. So I faced the fox. It had sharp fangs and it was three times as big as me. But I leapt at it, fearlessly an raked by claws across its snout. It was so surprised! You should've seen the look on its face. So I then bit into its tail and it gave the loudest cry ever. It was even funny. And it ran off. Scared away the fox myself, I did," Floodwhisker bragged. Brightkit gaped. She hadn't even realised Silverdrop and Heartstorm

had arrived.

"Were they good?" asked Heartstorm. Pigeonfeather nodded.

"Of course," he said.

"Say thank you Bumblekit. We've got a surprise for you," Silverdrop said. Bumblekit thanked Pigeonfeather. Heartstorm trotted to Brightkit and nudged her gently.

"Say thank you to Floodwhisker and bye. We've got to go," Heartstorm whispered. Brightkit squeaked a thank you and Floodwhisker grunted in response. Then the four cats padded back towards the nursery.

"Why do you have a mouse?" asked Brightkit.

"You'll see," said Silverdrop knowingly. They all sat down on the soft sand in the nursery.

"you both are old enough to eat prey," declared Heartstorm. Brightkit squealed and Bumblekit's eyes went wide.

"Yay!" exclaimed Brightkit, leaping to her feet. Silverdrop put the mouse to the ground.

"Take small bites," she said. Brightkit leapt at the mouse and sunk her teeth into it. Bumblekit did the same. Brightkit gobbled down the meat, frowning slightly. She grimaced then smiled.

"Wow! It's so good!" she cried. Bumblekit chewed slowly then gulped down the food.

"Tastes weird," he muttered.

"You'll get used to it. Now that you can both eat prey, you can try pigeon, fish, vole, sparrow and even lizards," Heartstorm said. Silverdrop beamed proudly.

"Lizards?" gaped Brightkit. "That's weird!"

"Is it hard to catch lizards?" asked Bumblekit.

"not if you know how to," Heartstorm said.

"Can you teach me? Please?" asked Brightkit.

"Of course," Heartstorm said. The kits took a few more bites then returned to wrestling with Heatherkit and Daisykit. Heartstorm and Silverdrop finished the rest of the mouse, watching their kits lovingly.

Ch. 4

[image]

A cold but fresh wind blew. The moon shone brightly above. A full moon. The ground was covered in a thin layer of soft snow. Heartstorm padded slowly, watching his foot sink into the snow. Silverdrop padded quietly next to Heartstorm. Even if the air was cold, Heartstorm felt warm, as if Silverdrop was emitting some sort of heat. They padded quietly, admiring the view as they made their way up the hill. They sat down at the top of the hill. Even as a cold wind blew, Heartstorm didn't feel it at all. It was like falling in love with Silverdrop all over again. They gazed down at the world below.

"You've told me about your parents," Silverdrop said suddenly. Heartstorm cocked his head.

"Yeah?" he said.

"But I haven't told you about mine," Silverdrop said.

"I know your parents are Thunderspark and Pebblespot," Heartstorm said.

"But I haven't told you about them, or Goosekit or Spottedkit," Silverdrop said.

"You don't need to talk about them, if you don't feel comfortable," Heartstorm assured Silverdrop. They twirled tails.

"But I need to. You're my mate," Silverdrop said.

"You don't have to. I'll love you no matter your past," Heartstorm told her gently and honestly.

"You deserve to know," Silverdrop said firmly. "Gooskit, Spottedkit and I were the best of friends. We were always together. We were a happy family, Thunderspark, Pebblespot,

Goosekit, Spottedkit and I. Then something happened between thunderspark and Pebblespot. He attacked her. She was badly wounded and he was put into isolation for half a moon. All three of us, my siblings and I, missed Thunderspark. We didn't really understand what he had done to Pebblespot. But one day, he lured Goosekit and Spottedkit out of camp. I didn't want to go. But I went anyway. We crept out of camp because we had heard Thunderspark. But on our way towards the voice, I- I chickened out. I ran back to camp. Thunderspark killed Goosekit and Spottedkit. They were just kits! Unprotected. Innocent. Pebblespot became extremely protective of me. Even when this kind cat, Goldenmist approached her, she never let me near him. Never let herself near him. But he truly was kind and he took his time with her. Finally, they became mates. But I never got to know him. Pebblespot refused to let us be alone together. But he seemed so nice. I ached for a real father. He seemed like he could have been a good father... He really did. But Pebblespot refused to let me near him. She was too hurt, broken. Then one day, Pebblespot started dying... Frogleap, he had just become medicine cat said she only had a quarter moon. There was nothing he could do. And Thornstar asked her what she wanted... you know, before she died. She said she wanted to see me become a warrior. Thornstar did it. For her. I became a warrior before anyone else. Then one day, Goldenmist died, because of ThunderClan. Pebblespot was overcome with grief and died soon after. Thornstar said I'd still train but after some time, since I was already a warrior, my trainings just ceased." Heartstorm frowned.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"It's ok," whispered Silverdrop. "I have you. Bumblekit. Brightkit. And Sagekit." She leaned into Heartstorm. He breathed in her warm scent. The world swam before him. They pushed against each other, to keep warm.

"I won't let you down," promised Heartstorm. Silverdrop looked into his eyes. Heartstorm's voice caught in his throat. He was lost in her beautiful eyes, a swirl of blue and grey. Perfection.

"You could never let me down," replied Silverdrop. Her voice... His breath felt as if it had been snatched away. He understood how he could have fallen for her. But he didn't deserve

her. Heartstorm felt his ears swimming with tears. He loved her so much. Too much. He wouldn't let her go through any more grief. They sat in silence, not needing to talk. They understood each other. No words could explain how much Heartstorm loved Silverdrop but he knew she understood.

"I love you," Heartstorm said anyways.

"I love you more," Silverdrop whispered back.

Ch. 5

Heartstorm woke up to some heated talking. He blinked open his eyes and stretched. A few cats were talking angrily amongst them.

"What is it?" he yawned. Eelfrost slipped to his side.

"The Gathering yesterday," Eelfrost told him. Heartstorm had gone to sleep before they had gotten back from the Gathering.

"Oh, what happened?" asked Heartstorm.

"You should've gone," Eelfrost said. Heartstorm frowned. Eelfrost had a small cut on his shoulder and the fur on his ear was missing.

"What happened to you?" He exclaimed.

"I was about to tell you. The new leader of ShadowClan is Clawstar. And the new deputy is Rabbitleap," explained Eelfrost. "Thornstar went first, he said there were new kits, Bumblekit, Brightkit, Daisykit and Heatherkit. He told everyone about Sagekit's death and we all gave a moment of silence. When Clawstar went up there, he threatened Thornstar. Said he was going to kill Thornstar then rip apart RiverClan and hunt you down. Then he- he said he'd kill your mate... and your kits...." Heartstorm's heart dropped. "We were all mad and this time, Thornstar was too. Then- then the clouds covered the sky... And the moon was blocked. We threw ourselves onto ShadowClan. And, this might seem weird, but ThunderClan helped us. They attacked ShadowClan as well. Only WindClan stood apart. I think ThunderClan was still mad that Cinderstar had threatened *them* at the other Gatherings. So yeah, finally ShadowClan fled and we came back. Nobody was badly hurt, only ShadowClan was." Heartstorm nodded thoughtfully.

"Wow...," he murmured. "I've got to go see Silverdrop." Eelfrost nodded and Heartstorm rushed past him towards the nursery. He slipped in. Silverdrop looked up, a smile on her face.

"What's up?" she asked, seeing his face.

"Did you hear about the Gathering last night?" asked Heartstorm.

"No, what happened?" asked Silverdrop. Heartstorm retold everything Eelfrost had told him.

"They're really keen on getting revenge on you," Silverdrop frowned, pulling Bumblekit and Brightkit towards her.

"I just- if I hadn't come here, ShadowClan wouldn't want trouble with RiverClan," Heartstorm sighed.

"And if you hadn't come, Brightkit, Bumblekit and Sagekit wouldn't have lived," Silverdrop retorted firmly. Heartstorm sunk to the ground, giving a small lick to Brightkit as she mumbled good morning to him. Suddenly, Thornstar poked his head into the den.

"Heartstorm, there are a few things we need to talk about," he beckoned. Heartstorm eyed Silverdrop nervously.

"Good luck," she whispered.

"Bye," Heartstorm replied as he followed Thornstar out. They entered his den. Heartstorm looked around, expecting to see Reedpelt or Frogleap, but they were not there.

"I wish to speak to you first alone then Frogleap will join us followed by Cinderstar and Reedpelt," Thornstar told Heartstorm. Heartstorm nodded nervously. Was Thornstar going to throw him out of RiverClan because of what had happened the day before?

"I am going to retire," Thornstar told Heartstorm, closing his eyes. "I had planned it already in green-leaf. But now there is a new threat, RiverClan might think I'm just trying to run away from my responsibilities. I am not. But I think Reedpelt, will be able to handle things, with my help, Frogleap's and... yours." Heartstorm was now confused. Thornstar was retiring? To the elders den? But they needed him.

"I am not leaving, I'm just passing on responsibilities. I

still do want to do what is good for the Clan, and that means giving the role of leader to a more competent cat," Thornstar said. Heartstorm was slightly sad Thornstar was retiring but it was his choice. He nodded. But why was Thornstar telling Heartstorm this?

"You wonder why I am telling you this," Thornstar said. "Because Heartstorm, I know, you would be a good leader." Heartstorm almost choked. Wait what?

"I'm sorry what?" blurted Heartstorm.

"You would be a good leader," repeated Thornstar. "Now, let's turn back to the threat at hand. Reedpelt, Frogleap and I have decided that ShadowClan's threats are not empty. I trust you heard what happened yesterday." Heartstorm nodded. "Good. So we have taken their threats into account. Now, Frogleap has just diagnosed Cinderstar with this illness. Forgive me if I don't tell you what it is, I do not remember. Pebblespot, a warrior you did not know, had this illness a long time ago." Heartstorm's thoughts flickered to Silverdrop and he felt a pang of sadness but not for Cinderstar.

"How long does she have?" asked Heartstorm.

"About half a moon," Thornstar said. "And Frogleap has told her about it. And she has decided she will now inform us about ShadowClan's battle plans. Yes, apparently she knew all along they had plans to attack, as she made them."

"But she said she never showed them to anybody! Or finished them!" exclaimed Heartstorm, infuriated by Cinderstar.

"We were never sure she was telling the truth," sighed Thornstar. "But now she claims she did finish the plans and she will tell us all about it. As she is going to die."

"Liar," muttered Heartstorm under his breath. "She's a liar."

"Well, she's decided to tell us about it, and they're going to come soon," Thornstar said.

"How do we know we can trust her?" asked Heartstorm

angrily. He hated Cinderstar with all his heart.

"We don't know that. But we'll see what she's got to say and we'll prepare ourselves accordingly," Thornstar said. Heartstorm nodded.

"Just one more question," he said suddenly. "When are you retiring?" Thornstar gave a small sad smile.

"Tomorrow," he said. Heartstorm hung his head. Then Frogleap, Cinderstar and Reedpelt padded into the den. Cinderstar's eyes locked onto Heartstorm and she hissed.

"What is *he* doing here?" she spat. "He tried to kill me for StarClan's sake!" Thornstar glared at her coldly.

"Sit," Thornstar oredered. Reedpelt smiled to Heartstorm and they all sat in a circle.

"So, tell us about your plans," Thornstar said smoothly.

"I'm not talking when *he's* here," Cinderstar spat. Heartstorm's fur bristled.

"You are, and you will," Thornstar hissed.

"You can't make me," snapped Cinderstar.

"You are in RiverClan," Thornstar reminded Cinderstar. "We have so far been very generous and hospitable to you. But, we would be happy to cease giving you food for a few days, maybe till you starve if you do not cooperate." Cinderstar looked shocked, as if unable to believe Thornstar would do that to her.

"You can't do that!" exclaimed Cinderstar angrily.

"Are you telling me what I can and cannot do?" hissed Thornstar, his eyes thunderous. Cinderstar muttered under her breath.

"I'll tell you!" she huffed finally. She glared at Heartstorm who didn't flinch.

"Then tell us," Thornstar snapped.

"ShadowClan will attack on the first full moon of green-leaf. *I* planned it like that as half the Clan would be at the Gathering and most cats would just be unguarded and celebrating green-leaf," Cinderstar said proudly. Reedpelt and Thornstar did not seem amused.

"So they are not planning on going to the Gathering," Thornstar muttered.

"Of course not," scoffed Cinderstar.

"But there is a pact," Reedpelt pointed out.

"If they're not at the Gathering the pact doesn't exactly apply," Cinderstar retorted.

"Clever," murmured Reedpelt under his breath thoughtfully.

"I know. Planned it all by myself," smiled Cinderstar. Thornstar spat at her.

"Tell us about the whole plan," Thornstar ordered.

"There would be groups of like three or four. If there is patrol, one group will take on the patrol while the rest sneak past to the camp," Cinderstar continued.

"Ha, we increased patrols to five cats," Reedpelt said.

"Thank you, for interrupting me," Cinderstar said sarcastically. Reedpelt rolled his eyes. "Anyways, each group would target a different den. Two or three groups would go to the warrior's den. One to the elders, one to the apprentices and another to the nursery. Where *your* kits would be." Heartstorm bristled.

"They'll be apprentices by then," he replied coldly.

"And then?" asked Thornstar.

"That's it," shrugged Cinderstar. Thornstar raised his eyebrows.

"Really?" he said, not sounding very impressed.

"It's mostly about the timing," replied Cinderstar looking hurt. "It's all about the timing. We don't even need a plan when the timing is right."

"Bring her back to the medicine den," Thornstar said, flicking his tail. Reedpelt nodded and he and Cinderstar slipped out of the den.

"Let's wait for Reedpelt," Thornstar said.
Heartstorm's mind was racing. ShadowClan had gone through so much just to get revenge on them. He wanted to rip Cinderstar's pelt off. Finally, Reedpelt entered the den once more.

"Cinderstar might still by lying," Thornstar said. "We cannot trust her. But let's take into account what she said about attacking on the full moon, when all the Clans should be at the Gathering. From now on, when we go to Gatherings, we will bring the elders and as little warriors as possible. If ShadowClan is not there, we will rush back as quickly as possible. And we will put guards outside of camp through the whole night."

"I think we should increase the number of patrols," Heartstorm said. "Mostly at night."

"Yes, I was thinking the same thing," nodded Thornstar.

"We need to tell the Clan about this," Reedpelt said. Thornstar nodded in agreement. Heartstorm had a feeling Thornstar was letting him be in this conversation to prepare him. He wondered for what.

"Yes, we do. I will ask for a Clan Gathering tonight," Thornstar nodded.

"And how about Cinderstar?" asked Reedpelt. "How is she doing?"

"She's not going to survive long," Frogleap said emotionless. "Thornstar, there are other problems as well."

"What is it?" asked Thornstar worriedly.

"I am getting old," Frogleap said slowly, daring anybody to laugh. "RiverClan will need a medicine cat when I'm... gone."

"I'll talk to Heatherkit or Daisykit about it," Reedpelt suggested. Thornstar nodded.

"I think this is all for now," Thornstar finished, giving Heartstorm a brief smile. "Thank you for coming Heartstorm."

Ch. 6

"Cats of RiverClan, please gather around for a full Clan meeting," called Thornstar from the High Rock. Brightkit leapt at Silverdrop.

"Can we go, please?" she begged.

"No, kits aren't allowed," Silverdrop said sternly.

"He said all cats of RiverClan," pointed out Heartstorm. Silverdrop gave him a firm look and he backed away. "I mean, you kits are too young." Bumblekit frowned.

"I'm going," he said defiantly. Silverdrop sighed.

"You can listen from here," she said. Reedpelt stuck his head into the den.

"Heartstorm, come on," he pressed. Heartstorm gave a small lick to each of his kits and trotted to join Reedpelt. Thornstar nodded at them as he spotted them and stood in front of his Clan. Heartstorm spotted Acornheart, her kits and Silverdrop slip out of the nursery followed by Bumblekit and Brightkit. He smiled in amusement.

"RiverClan," Thornstar addressed his Clan. "Today, it is time for me to retire." Heartstorm heard everybody gasp and a loud murmuring erupted. He caught Eelfrost's eye who gave him a questioning look. Heartstorm wasn't surprised but know he had to accept it was real.

"Reedpelt will be the new leader of RiverClan. Now, I need to explain a few things first. I have planned to retire since green-leaf and with the new threat of ShadowClan I have rethought my decision but I know it is for the good of the Clan that I give my position over to Reedpelt. He has learnt a lot as a deputy and I know he is ready and will lead RiverClan strongly and loyally,"

Thornstar announced. Heartstorm hoped that the Clan wouldn't be outraged but instead they all bowed their heads in respect. Reedpelt joined Thornstar up on the High Rock.

"We have taken into account what is happening with ShadowClan," he said. "And from now on, at night there will be a guard shift outside of camp. And we will double the border patrols. Cinderstar has indulged to us that the attack will be on the night of the first Gathering of green-leaf. We will have to be extra vigilant at Gatherings from now on." There were some growls and angry hisses from warriors.

"Tonight, Reedpelt will travel with Frogleap to the Moonstone. He will receive his nine lives and relieve me of my leadership," Thornstar said. "Although I will not be leader once I am elder, I will still contribute in helping RiverClan overcome the threat of ShadowClan. We will defeat them." Yowls and cheers erupted. Heartstorm watched his Clan proudly. The Clan meeting was finished. Reedpelt joined Heartstorm's side.

"While I'm out tonight," he said, "you are in charge." Heartstorm's eyes widened. Him? But he was just... Heartstorm.

"M-me?" stammered Heartstorm.

"Yes Heartstorm. Take the lead," Reedpelt said sternly before stalking off to find Frogleap. Heartstorm nervously looked around. Why had he been chosen. Eelfrost trotted to him, his eyes wide.

"Thornstar! Retiring!" he exclaimed, looking overwhelmed. "Never knew this day to come. And he's retiring right when we learn ShadowClan has plans to attack! How crazy is that?" Heartstorm nodded, not really listening.

"Heartstorm, what's going on?" Eelfrost asked suspiciously.

"Erm nothing," Heartstorm said, shrinking away as cats turned to him. Reedpelt had just announced that Heartstorm was in charge while he left.

"You knew! You knew Thornstar was retiring!" exclaimed Eelfrost. Heartstorm slunk behind a bush. Eelfrost followed him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I er- I don't know!" replied Heartstorm, glancing over the bush to make sure nobody was watching. "I don't know! I don't know why Reedpelt put me in charge!"

"But you knew about increasing the patrols and Thornstar retiring and all!" Eelfrost exclaimed.

"Yeah well I don't know why they told me! Ok? I don't know!" Heartstorm said, feeling slightly scared. Eelfrost grinned.

"Never seen you so worked up. Chill. *I* know why," Eelfrost said looking at Heartstorm smugly. Heartstorm's head snapped up.

"Why?" he asked.

"Cos you're going to be the next deputy!" Eelfrost said. Heartstorm sputtered and burst into laughter.

"That's funny!" he choked.

"For the first time in my life," Eelfrost said seriously, "I'm not kidding." Heartstorm stopped laughing and slumped to the floor, feeling dizzy.

"Oh no," he moaned.

"What's wrong?" asked Eelfrost.

"I don't know anything about being deputy! Why does it have to be me?" Heartstorm groaned. Eelfrost didn't look impressed.

"Really?" he cried. "I'd be honoured. I mean, I'd totally say yes. Not that I'd ever be asked... or chosen."

"I don't-" Heartstorm was broken off.

"Hey Heartstorm," Mudclaw called. "How many patrols do you want tonight and where? What are the shifts going to be for guarding?" Heartstorm glanced nervously at Eelfrost who shrugged. Heartstorm stepped out of the shadows and stood in front of a group of cats.

"We'll have a patrol now," Heartstorm decided. "Can you lead one?" Mudclaw nodded. "Hawkflight, can you lead another one at sunset?"

"Sure thing," nodded Hawkflight.

"As for the shifts," Heartstorm thought aloud. "I think we'll make them an hour."

"Till when?" asked Dustclaw.

"Dawn," Heartstorm said. "You can take the first one at dusk. Smallear, you're after Dustclaw, then Smoketail." The group of cats nodded. Heartstorm turned to Eelfrost.

"That was great," he grinned.

"Thanks. Your shift is after Smoketail's," Heartstorm said. Eelfrost threw his head back.

"What? I'll be losing beauty sleep," he groaned.

"Eelfrost...," Heartstorm sighed.

"Come on, we're besties. Let somebody else do it," Eelfrost said. Heartstorm raised an eyebrow.

"Eelfrost..., you're after Smoketail," Heartstorm said. "Sorry." He padded off to find other cats and give them their shifts. He found another group of cats.

"Applenose, your shift is right after Eelfrost. You're the sixth shift," Heartstorm told Applenose who nodded. "Each shift is an hour." He turned to Rainfeather and Softcry. "Softcry, you're after Applenose, then Rainfeather." Blacktail approached them.

"Is it the shifts?" she asked. Heartstorm nodded.

"Can you be after Rainfeather?" asked Heartstorm.

"Sure," nodded Blacktail. Rosebriar and Deerflame trotted over.

"Seen Eelfrost?" asked Deerflame.

"Yeah, over there," Heartstorm nodded towards the bushes. "Hey can you take the shift after Blacktail? One hour." Deerflame nodded with a smile. "And Rosebriar, you're after Deerflame. Heartstorm still needed two more cats. He'd take one shift but he needed somebody else. He spotted Stripedfur talking to Hawkflight.

"Hi Stripedfur," smiled Heartstorm.

"Hello Heartstorm," beamed Stripedfur, watching Hawkflight pad away. "You did a great job mentoring him."

"Thanks," said Heartstorm. It meant a lot. "You ok taking the shift guarding camp right before dawn? After me." Stripedfur nodded.

"Of course anything for you," Stripedfur said pleasantly. Happy at having organised everything, Heartstorm returned to the nursery. It hadn't been so bad. Nobody had refused him. He entered the den and Brightkit and Bumblekit ran at him.

"Are you going to be deputy?!" cried Brightkit.

"Hey kits!" chuckled Heartstorm, filled with love. "I don't know." Silverdrop smiled and gave Heartstorm a small lick on the cheek.

"Seems like Thornstar has taken a liking to you," she said.

"What do you mean?" asked Heartstorm.

"He's chosen you as deputy, hasn't he?" she said.

"I don't think so...," Heartstorm shrugged. "It should be Reedpelt's choice though, shouldn't it?"

"But I'm sure Thornstar will have contributed to it," Silverdrop said. "We'll all be so proud of you become RiverClan's deputy."

"I don't think I'm up to it," sighed Heartstorm, settling down. Acornheart, who couldn't help but overhear piped up.

"Well, if Thornstar thinks you're good enough, you must be," she assured. "Thornstar knows what he is doing. So does Reedpelt."

"Thanks," mumbled Heartstorm, touched.

"See?" smiled Silverdrop lovingly.

"Our dad is going to be deputy!" squealed Brightkit.

"That's so cool," grinned Bumblekit. Heartstorm smiled. He flicked his tail at them.

"I don't need to be deputy to take care of my Clan," he told them firmly but with a small smile.

Ch. 7

It was Heartstorm's shift. He yawned as he padded towards the camp entrance to relieve Deerflame from her duty. As he emerged from the entrance, he was surprised to see Deerflame pacing around looking attentive. She beamed when she spotted him.

"Didn't fall asleep?" yawned Heartstorm.

"Of course not!" exclaimed Deerflame in horror. "I'm on duty!"

"Reedpelt and Frogleap aren't back yet..," sighed Heartstorm, glancing around. The air was cold and everything eerily silent.

"Hope they found an alternative to going near ShadowClan," said Deerflame worriedly.

"Bet they did. It's Reedpelt," Heartstorm said. "And they can't hurt a medicine cat." Deerflame raised her eyebrows.

"It's ShadowClan, you never know," she said.

"Well, you should go get some rest," Heartstorm told Deerflame.

"It's alright, I'll keep you company for a while," Deerflame assured.

"Thanks," smiled Heartstorm. They listened to the quiet air around them and Heartstorm fluffed up his fur, shivering slightly in the cold.

"How are Brightkit and Bumblekit doing?" asked Deerflame.

"Great," Heartstorm said.

"I'm really sorry about Sagekit," sighed Deerflame.

"Yeah, me too," whispered Heartstorm. "But he's in StarClan."

"Yeah, he's with Brightheart," Deerflame nodded.

"Do you hear that?" Heartstorm said suddenly. He pricked his ears. He had definitely heard something disturb the silence. They heard the crunch of cats padding.

"Yeah, I definitely hear that. Not trying to be quiet, are they?" Deerflame said.

"Nope," Heartstorm chuckled. Reedpelt and Frogleap appeared from the bushes.

"Reedpelt!" exclaimed Deerflame, rushing to her father. He nuzzled her happily. Frogleap didn't look impressed.

"It's Reedstar now," he said flatly. Deerflame's eyes widened.

"Woah! Dad," she exclaimed happily. Reedstar smiled, giving her an affectionate lick on the forehead.

"Gotta tell your mum," he said.

"No, you gotta tell the Clan first," Frogleap replied. Reedstar padded to Heartstorm and winked.

"Didn't set the camp on fire," he teased. "Good work." Heartstorm beamed.

"Congratulations, Reedstar," Heartstorm said, dipping his head in respect. Reedstar smiled and slipped into camp after Frogleap. Seeing Deerflame's look, Heartstorm nodded at her to follow them.

"Go on, it's a special day for you," he said. Deerflame smiled, flicking her tail at him.

"Thanks," she said, trotting into camp after her father. Heartstorm watched the night sky, hearing a commotion in camp. He wanted to go back in and join the others asking Reedpelt questions but he stayed put. The night was quiet and calm. Heartstorm doubted ShadowClan would attack but they needed to be careful. Heartstorm felt himself getting tired and the excited talking in camp became distant. He sat down, not as alert as before and waited. His eyes drooped. A cat slipped beside him. He jumped up.

"Hey," said Stripedfur. "It's just me." Heartstorm heaved a sigh of relief.

"Oh hey, is my shift already over?" he said, trying to cover a yawn. Stripedfur chuckled.

"Go get some rest," she urged. Heartstorm smiled gratefully and slipped back into camp. The commotion about Reedstar had subsided and cats returned to their nests. Heartstorm slumped into his nest, glad for the rest. It felt like a minute after his head had hit the soft nest, he was being nudged to wake up once more.

"Heartstorm," came Deerflame's hurried voice. "Wake up! It's important." Somebody nipped Heartstorm's ear. He groaned.

"Come on," Eelfrost urged. "You lazy old cat." Eelfrost nudged him quite hard in the stomach and Heartstorm groaned and struggled up.

"What was that for?" he asked annoyed.

"Come on, it's a Clan meeting," Deerflame said and she padded out. Eelfrost waited for Heartstorm, shoving him playfully to walk faster.

"I'm tired alright?" Heartstorm muttered.

"Not my fault. You made the shifts," grinned Eelfrost. They sat behind the whole crowd of cats, gathered around the High Rock. Reedstar stood on top, surveying RiverClan. He smiled when

he spotted Eelfrost and Heartstorm joining the rest.

"As all of you know by now, I have received my nine lives," Reedstar announced. "I am now leader of RiverClan and I swear I will lead RiverClan loyally and I will serve RiverClan with all my heart." Reedstar dipped his head. Cats around nodded in approval and there were a few cheers. Heartstorm was just awed. He was glad that RiverClan had a dedicated leader that Thornstar had chosen himself.

"Now, as you know, we do not have a deputy. The deputy I have chosen, with Thornstar's advice, is very brave, loyal and talented and although he might not think he is good enough, Thornstar, Frogleap and I know he will serve RiverClan with all his heart and soul," Reedstar continued. Heartstorm glanced around as cats began murmuring. Whoever had been chosen must be a very good warrior. Blacktail or Moorpelt perhaps.

"Wow, Reedstar must really like this cat," whispered Eelfrost. "Do you think it's Deerflame?" Heartstorm shrugged, it could be.

"I say these words before , so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of RiverClan is...," Reedstar declared. "Heartstorm." Heartstorm's ears rang and Eelfrost leapt to his feet beside him.

"Heartstorm!" he exclaimed in amazement and excitement. "Y-y-you're you're the deputy!" Heartstorm's mind whirled. He must have heard wrong. He wasn't the deputy. It couldn't be him. Who would have chosen him? Thornstar would've known better. Cats turned to Heartstorm, edging him on. Heartstorm caught Silverdrop's eye, shaking his head in confusion but she just smiled, her eyes twinkling with love and pride. He looked down and spotted Bumblekit and Brightkit, jumping up and down.

"Go on, Heartstorm," came a gentle voice. Deerflame had padded to their side. "You're the deputy." Heartstorm was dazed as he walked slowly towards the High Rock. Cats around were murmuring. He didn't know if they were approving or not. He

caught Blacktail's eye as he walked up. Blacktail gazed at him back with pride.

"Go, my apprentice," she mouthed. And Heartstorm knew he could do it. He climbed onto the High Rock and stood tall and strong. Reedstar padded to him.

"Thornstar said you'd be a great deputy. It was his one wish before he retired. That I made you deputy. If he thinks you can do it, then you can. So don't doubt yourself," Reedstar whispered into his ear. Heartstorm wasn't very encouraged though.

"Thank you," he whispered softly. Suddenly, there was a roar and cheering broke out. Heartstorm's ears were filled with cheers and cries of approval. He leapt down from the High Rock as everybody crowded around him. He didn't understand fully how he could have been chosen. He didn't understand why everybody supported him but he knew he would be able to lead and serve RiverClan much better now. That was all he had ever wanted.

Ch. 8

Heartstorm awoke suddenly. It was just before dawn. He hurriedly got up and slipped out of the warrior's den. He felt stressed, knowing he had new responsibilities. He trotted to the nursery first, to see Silverdrop and the kits first. Silverdrop was awake and turned to smile at him.

"Hey deputy," she said softly.

"Good morning," he smiled back. Bumblekit and Brightkit were curled up under Silverdrop.

"You're early," remarked Silverdrop sleepily. Heartstorm settled down beside her.

"Yeah, gotta, do some patrols," Heartstorm said. "I mean, I don't really know what I'm supposed to do...."

"Well, organising patrols is a start. You organised the dawn border patrols for this morning yesterday, didn't you?" Silverdrop asked.

"Yeah, Reedstar did it for me...," Heartstorm sighed. It had been hard, just knowing he was the deputy. "I don't know..., I feel like everything I do now is like awkward and weird..."

"Heartstorm," chuckled Silverdrop lovingly. "It's all in your mind. We've accepted you as deputy. Ok? So there's nothing to worry about."

"Yeah.., well I still don't know what to do," Heartstorm sighed, slumping lower.

"Start off by organising patrols for the day. See if there's anything you can do to help, you know, check the fresh-kill pile and see if its full, if it isn't, get a hunting patrol," suggested Silverdrop gently. Heartstorm gave Silverdrop a small lick on the ear.

"Thank you so much," he said. "You're a lifesaver." Silverdrop smiled.

"Go and do your deputy duties. I'll tell the kits you'll see them tonight," Silverdrop smiled. Heartstorm thanked her and slipped out of the nursery quietly, feeling much better. He spotted the dawn patrols gathering by the entrance. There were three patrols. One for ThunderClan border, one for WindClan and the other for the territory ending at the Thunderpath and near the abandoned Twoleg nest. Heartstorm checked on the fresh-kill pile and cringed. There was only one sparrow. It wouldn't even feed both elders. He marched purposefully towards the warrior's den. Slowly, cats were getting up. All of them going on the border patrols. Heartstorm didn't have the heart to wake anybody up but Deerflame and Eelfrost. So he headed for Eelfrost and thumped him gently on the side. Eelfrost moaned and turned in his sleep but didn't open his eyes.

"Eelfrost," muttered Heartstorm, glancing around so nobody could see. Eelfrost didn't move or respond but instead, snored louder. Heartstorm sighed in exasperation. Another cat walked up behind Heartstorm.

"Hey, do you need anything?" asked a gentle voice. It was Softcry. Heartstorm spun around.

"Oh er, just Eelfrost," Heartstorm said awkwardly. Softcry gave him a knowing look.

"I'm not going on any of the dawn patrols," she told him.

"Oh that's great!" Heartstorm exclaimed, not meaning to. "Oh sorry, that was loud." Softcry chuckled softly.

"Eelfrost won't wake up unless he *has* to, so whatever you need him to do, I'll do it," Softcry suggested helpfully, she could see Heartstorm struggling with his new role.

"Thanks," Heartstorm said relieved, glad for Softcry's help. "I just need a hunting patrol. Do you mind leading one?" Softcry nodded.

"Of course," she said and winked then whispered under her breath, "Next time don't ask me if I want to, tell me to lead one."

"Oh right ok, of course, " Heartstorm stammered. Softcry smiled and padded around the warrior's den to raise a few cats. Heartstorm still needed another hunting patrol. He knew one patrol wouldn't be enough. He decided to go check on Cinderstar to waste some time and let a few more cats wake up. As he headed for the medicine den, he couldn't believe he was desperate enough to visit Cinderstar at his own will. He realised he could chose his own time guarding Cinderstar. He could totally not even give himself a shift but that would be very wrong and he didn't like what his Clanmates would think of that although Eelfrost would totally agree. Heartstorm slipped into the den. Frogleap was there, staring at his herb stock. Cinderstar was lounging on a nest, looking into the air.

"Hello Heartstorm," greeted Frogleap.

"Hi Frogleap," replied Heartstorm. "Is there anything I can do to help?" Frogleap shrugged.

"I do need to get a few more herbs, before they rot. But I'd need another cat, there's a lot," Frogleap said.

"Sure I'll come," Heartstorm volunteered. Frogleap gave him a hard stare.

"I would accept but right now, it's morning and you have many many things to organise and do, I'd prefer if you could ask another cat to help me," Frogleap said firmly. Heartstorm nodded, backing out of the den embarrassed. Now he had to organise a patrol and get somebody to help Frogleap. He knew nobody would be keen on helping Frogleap. And he didn't have the heart to wake anybody up. Just then, Reedstar padded to his side. Heartstorm gulped.

"How are you coping?" asked Reedstar. "I've just been to talk to Thornstar."

"Ok," Heartstorm shrugged.

"What are you doing now?" asked Reedstar.

"Wake somebody for a hunting patrol and to help Frogleap," Heartstorm sighed.

"Hard?" Reedstar said. "Just do it, don't worry about what they'll think of you. You're the deputy." Heartstorm nodded, not really believing it.

"For now," Reedstar said, "just organise patrols, see that everybody has a job. You'll see, you'll ease into this job as if it were a river." Heartstorm nodded unsurely. "Don't get too nervous." Reedstar nodded him in encouragement and padded off to do whatever leaders do. Heartstorm took a deep breath and marched into the warrior's den. Half the nests were filled with snoring cats. Heartstorm chose Embergaze as he seemed slightly more awake.

"Embergaze?" Heartstorm said awkwardly. Embergaze shot up.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Oh um," Heartstorm said shocked at how quickly he had woken up, he was the opposite of his son.

"I'm a light sleeper. I can wake up anytime," Embergaze explained at Heartstorm's look. "Unlike Eelfrost." Heartstorm chuckled.

"Well, I'd like you to lead a hunting patrol," Heartstorm said bravely. "Please."

"You don't need the please," Embergaze said softly but nodded. He padded off to wake others. Heartstorm sighed in relief. But now was the even harder part, waking somebody up to help Frogleap. Just then, he spotted Deerflame, getting up. He rushed to her before any distractions could get in the way.

"Oh hi," she said. "Up early?"

"Deerflame," Heartstorm said hurriedly. "Can you please help Frogleap?" Deerflame lifted her eyebrows.

"Now? I'm tired," she said.

"Come on," Heartstorm said. "I-i'm too scared to ask anybody else." Deerflame sighed.

"Fine, for you," she muttered and glanced at Eelfrost.

"Thanks so much," Heartstorm said quickly and rushed out. As he took deep breaths of fresh air, he realised it felt good, knowing that the food pile would soon be piled with prey and knowing their border was being marked and protected. He found himself liking being able to take care of his Clan this way. Maybe if he got better at being a deputy, one day he might be able to lead RiverClan fully as leader.

Ch. 9

Heartstorm looked into the fresh-kill pile. He gave a brief smile. The two hunting patrols had come back and now it the pile was filled to the brim. There were four mice, two crows, a pigeon, two voles, a lizard and two shrew. As there were no apprentices, Reedstar had told him that he could assign warriors to feed the elders. Heartstorm took on this responsibility himself, seeing his Clanmates so busy. He knew they also deserved a rest after going on a patrol. Heartstorm grabbed three mice and padded past lounging cats towards the elder's den. Thornstar and Floodwhisker were deep in conversation and Pigeonfeather watched them, yawning.

"Hey Heartstorm!" called Thornstar happily. Heartstorm smiled and dropped the mice at the elders' feet.

"Thank you," nodded Floodwhisker.

"No problem," Heartstorm said.

"Busy?" Thornstar asked.

"Yeah," nodded Heartstorm.

"Ah, well you know, Heartstorm, you should give some of your responsibilities to others," Thornstar advised.

"I know but I feel.... bad," Heartstorm said.

"You shouldn't," Thornstar said firmly. "All you are doing is helping the Clan." Heartstorm frowned, thinking about it. Thornstar was right.

"You're right," mumbled Heartstorm.

"I know," Thornstar nodded, slightly amused. "Now go back to your duties and help RiverClan." Heartstorm nodded dutifully. If Thornstar thought him good enough, he couldn't disappoint. Heartstorm headed for Beestripe who was lounging in

the shade. He knew Beestripe hadn't gone on patrol that day and they had decided to double the border patrols.

"Beestripe, I'm leading a border patrol, are you coming?" Heartstorm said firmly. There was no saying no. Beestripe nodded and got up. Heartstorm then headed for Hawkflight and Mudclaw.

"I'm leading a border patrol," Heartstorm told them. "Coming?"

"Sure," shrugged Hawkflight and Mudclaw trotted behind them. They headed for the camp entrance, Hawkflight trotted beside Heartstorm.

"It's great," Hawkflight said, "you being chosen to be deputy, I mean."

"Thanks," Heartstorm smiled.

"You totally deserve it," Hawkflight said. It meant a lot to Heartstorm. He nodded mutely in thanks. They headed for the WindClan and ThunderClan border. Heartstorm felt the fresh scent of WindClan as they approached the river. He padded nearer to investigate and sniffed the air.

"They haven't crossed," Heartstorm reported. They marked the border and made their way towards ThunderClan border. Finally, they reached it, marking the border once more. ThunderClan hadn't put one paw over the border since the battle and they never talked to RiverClan anymore.

"seems more quiet here, nowadays," remarked Mudclaw.

"That's not right," sighed Hawkflight.

"Yeah, ThunderClan likes sniggering and taunting others," Heartstorm agreed. They headed back to camp. When Heartstorm entered, Frogleap dragged him away.

"there's a meeting right now," he said. Heartstorm followed Frogleap into the leader's den where Reedstar and Thornstar were.

"We are going to talk with Cinderstar," Reedstar told Heartstorm. He nodded. Frogleap had left and while waiting, they talked about how the patrols had gone.

"WindClan is normal. They never really crossed the border but ThunderClan, we practically never see them anymore," Reedstar said.

"Yeah, I noticed at the border patrol just now," agreed Heartstorm. Frogleap pushed back into the den with Cinderstar wheezing behind him.

"What do you want?" she asked them resentfully.

"To talk about the battle ShadowClan planned," Reedstar said, taking the lead. Thornstar nodded, deep in thought.

"Why would I talk? I don't feel it," moaned Cinderstar. "I'm on my death bed! Give me some rest."

"You've had rest," snapped Thornstar suddenly.

"Yes, and if you do not help us, we will kick you out," Reedstar said coldly but honestly. Heartstorm narrowed his eyes at Cinderstar. She did look weaker. He felt slightly bad for her but he didn't really care if she died.

"So you've been promoted eh?" Cinderstar coughed, eyeing Heartstorm. He held his head high. Cinderstar hung her head and her eyes looked slightly unfocused.

"Always knew you'd do something great...," whispered Cinderstar.

"We're not here to talk about me," Heartstorm said loudly, not wanting to talk about his life in ShadowClan. Cinderstar growled.

"So what do you want to know?" she asked.

"What you think ShadowClan will do," Reedstar said.

"What do you mean?" croaked Cinderstar.

"Is ShadowClan going to follow your plan? Do you think they will?" asked Reedstar sharply.

"Well..., yes," Cinderstar said frowning. "I was their leader and my plan was brilliant."

"And why wouldn't they carry out the plan earlier?" questioned Reedstar.

"Because-," Cinderstar didn't speak but finally, "it was about Blizzardkit. They- they wanted him to become an apprentice first. Have some training." Heartstorm's ears pricked up and he felt a shiver run through his spine.

"What? Who is Blizzardkit?" asked Reedstar.

"Goldenheart's kits," Cinderstar said, looking at Heartstorm smugly. "Maybe you don't know Heartstorm... I'm find out. I was the smartest in ShadowClan after all." Heartstorm felt suddenly cold.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Reedstar, staring at Heartstorm in a weird way.

"Oh well, Heartstorm, all this time you thought your father was still all hung up on Brightheart, he loved another cat, Goldenheart. All while caring for you, he lied,," Cinderstar said smugly, her voice seemed to be tearing at Heartstorm's heart. He had known this all along, but to hear it from Cinderstar... He hung his head, feeling his eyes prickle.

"Shut up!" snapped Reedstar. "You are not to talk to our deputy like that!" Thornstar shuffled to Heartstorm's side.

"Keep your head up," he whispered. Heartstorm forced himself to look up and into Cinderstar's eyes. She didn't waver. He broke their gaze.

"Oh yes, Stormpelt was always a player. He played with other she-cats' hearts. You know, I used to like him," Cinderstar

became unfocused, her voice wavering slightly. "But I'm glad he didn't chose me. I'd kill myself if he ever loved me. His love is fake." Heartstorm let out a growl but he couldn't protect Stormpelt. Cinderstar was right.

"Get back to the point," Reedstar said angrily, seeing Heartstorm upset.

"Well, Goldenheart is one of the cats most bent on revenge. She wants her kits to avenge Stormpelt. So Blizzardkit, the eldest, needs to at least learn a few things and become an apprentice first," Cinderstar explained. Heartstorm had known most of this. He had known Goldenheart wanted revenge but he hadn't known she'd send her own kit to get it.

"And how will an apprentice kill Heartstorm?" Thornstar asked.

"Oh no, I told you, they want to do more than *kill* him. Death is too easy," Cinderstar said as if they were stupid. "They want to break him." She broke into a wild smile and Heartstorm couldn't stand it anymore. He lunged at her and slashed her across her throat. Her eyes went wide and she let out a yelp and collapsed to the ground. Blood gushed out. Soon, she lay in a pool of blood. Frogleap made no move to help her. Nobody moved. Cinderstar shuddered and she lay still. Dead. Heartstorm's mind whirled. What had he just done? But he knew what he had done. And it would haunt him forever. He had killed a cat with his own claws.

Ch. 10

The temperature in the den dropped. Heartstorm pressed his back to the cold den wall.

"Well, she was going to die anyway," Frogleap muttered. Reedstar didn't seem amused, just angered. Thornstar looked deep in thought. Heartstorm felt guilt flood him. He had killed a cat. Yes, he hated her...., but he had still killed her out of anger.

"Heartstorm, she was the only way we could find out about ShadowClan's plans," Reedstar said slowly, trying to keep his temper in. "What are we going to do now?" Heartstorm shrunk back from Reedstar's accusing eyes.

"There was nothing more she could tell us that we didn't already know or that was important," Thornstar put in. Heartstorm wanted to run away. How could Thornstar still be protecting him when he had done everything wrong?

"Thornstar, I told you he wasn't right! He isn't- he isn't ready yet!" Reedstar retorted angrily then looked coldly at Heartstorm. "I understand she was annoying you but you had to control yourself. You could have walked out instead of listening to her. But you chose to stay. You chose to listen. And you chose to kill her." Heartstorm couldn't say a word. It was like his mouth had gone dry. He just hung his head. Frogleap sighed.

"So what are we going to do?" he asked.

"Well Heartstorm needs to be punished," Reedstar said firmly but not meanly. He didn't look as angry anymore but Heartstorm felt a sinking feeling. He couldn't be kicked out of RiverClan. RiverClan was all he had. Silverdrop, Bumblekit, Brightkit, Eelfrost, Deerflame, Thornstar... He needed them. He couldn't leave. He wouldn't be able to make himself a new life.

"How?" Thornstar asked with a sigh.

"The Clan must not know Heartstorm killed Cinderstar," Frogleap put in. "He is the deputy."

"Well this shows he shouldn't be," Reedstar said.

"Reedstar, you saw how Cinderstar provoked Heartstorm. And she wouldn't have lived for more than a few days anyways. Our food supplies were also getting low," Thornstar poined out.

"How about this?" Reedstar suggested. "We'll tell the Clan that Cinderstar died because of her sickness so his life in RiverClan isn't destroyed. I do want him to stay in RiverClan." He gazed at Heartstorm with a sort of fondness but Reedstar needed to be firm. He was the leader.

"And Heartstorm can return to being a warrior," Reedstar said. Thornstar took a deep breath but gave a feeble nod. Frogleap shrugged. Heartstorm wanted to shout back, to fight back for his role. But there was nothing he could say. Reedstar was being much more generous than he should. Heartstorm hadn't realised how attached he had been to his role until now, when it had been snatched away. His heart beat faster and he felt a ringing in his ear but he deserved it.

"Reedstar-" Thornstar began but Reedstar silenced him with a flick of his tail.

"I deserve it," Heartstorm spoke up, finally finding his voice. "I'll give up my role." Reedstar nodded in content and Thornstar looked like he was going to argue but Heartstorm shook his head.

"Tonight, I will appoint a new deputy," Reedstar said. Heartstorm hung his head. "I am sorry it didn't work out Heartstorm." Reedstar looked genuine as he sighed sadly.

"Thank you," whispered Heartstorm, looking mostly at Thornstar. He slipped out of the den, not wanting to face anybody anymore. He heard somebody call his name but he brushed past, walking faster towards the camp entrance. He slipped out. A cold wind ruffled his fur but he didn't pay attention to it. He walked deeper into the forest. Faster and faster. Till he was running.

Running because he wanted to run away from what he had done. But he couldn't. He ran through the forest, streaking past trees, rivers, rocks... He halted. Panting hard. Slowly, he sunk to the floor. It was no use running anymore. He took deep breaths. Feeling the cold seep into his fur. He closed his eyes.

Ch. 11

Heartstorm shivered.

"Heartstorm, wake up," came a worried voice. He opened his eyes. Deerflame and Eelfrost were looking down at Heartstorm in worry.

"You ok?" Eelfrost asked, concerned. Heartstorm was too cold to reply. Deerflame helped him to his feet. "Took us a long time to find you."

"It's starting to snow," Deerflame said. Heartstorm realised a thin layer of snow covered the ground. He followed his best friends back to camp.

"Why were you out there?" asked Deerflame.

"I er... wasn't feeling too good," Heartstorm replied.

"Why didn't you go to Frogleap?" exclaimed Deerflame. "Let's go right now." She marched forward. Eelfrost held her back.

"Hey, he doesn't want to go," Eelfrost said. "And he doesn't have to." Deerflame glared at him.

"It's for his own good!" retorted Deerflame.

"He knows what's for his own good. And sometimes, Frogleap isn't," Eelfrost said, trying to hide a chuckle. Heartstorm gave a weak smile.

"Yeah, it was something Frogleap couldn't fix," Heartstorm agreed. "Has Reedstar called a Clan meeting yet?" Deerflame and Eelfrost gave him a weird look.

"Why?" asked Eelfrost.

"'cause er... 'cause...," Heartstorm trailed off. *'Cause I'm not deputy anymore...* Heartstorm looked down.

"Cos what?" asked Eelfrost.

"I'm- can I tell you here?" Heartstorm said nervously. They stopped some way in front of the camp entrance. Light snow slowly fell.

"What's wrong Heartstorm?" Deerflame questioned worriedly. "Are you sure you don't need Frogleap?" Heartstorm nodded.

"I-I'm not deputy anymore," Heartstorm blurted. Eelfrost and Deerflame stared at him.

"Why not?" Deerflame asked carefully, not really believing.

"I- I.... promise me you won't tell anybody?" Heartstorm said.

"Of course. If you don't want us to," Deerflame said. Eelfrost nodded in agreement.

"Swear to me," Heartstorm said.

"I swear," Eelfrost said, looking more worried now.

"Yeah... me too. I swear," Deerflame stammered.

"I killed Cinderstar," whispered Heartstorm. Deerflame's jaw dropped. Eelfrost looked shocked as if he didn't know whether to smile or be horrified.

"You what?" Eelfrost asked.

"I killed Cinderstar." Eelfrost nodded slowly.

"Wow, well good job. Never would have had the guts for it," Eelfrost said. Heartstorm gave him a disbelieving look.

"You killed her?" echoed Deerflame. "B-but how? When? Why?"

"We were having a meeting. And she started talking about Goldenheart and Blizzardkit and how Stormpelt betrayed Brightheart. Right in front of me. I couldn't help it. I couldn't," Heartstorm was practically begging. Begging his friends to believe him. Begging them to understand. "I just... I just slashed her across her neck." There was silence. Heartstorm knew they were going to leave him. He didn't blame them. Who would want a murderer as a friend?

"I understand," Eelfrost said. "I understand. I get it. I'd have been triggered too. I-I would've done the same." Deerflame didn't say anything.

"I understand if you don't want to be my friend," Heartstorm told Deerflame bleakly.

"I do. I do," Deerflame said. "Of course I do! I just- Ugh, I would've killed Cinderstar myself if I'd been there. I'm just so-angry! With her." Heartstorm was filled with warmth. He could never show how grateful he was for such great friends.

"T-thanks guys. I don't know what to say," Heartstorm stammered. "I- I love you guys." Eelfrost and Deerflame smiled.

"We love you too," replied Deerflame.

"So, like, no offence to Cinderstar," Eelfrost said, turning back into his funny self, "but did she die a painful death? I mean, if you were going to kill her, you could've at least made it painful." Deerflame pursed her lips and Heartstorm burst into laughter.

"It certainly seemed painful for her," Heartstorm said.

"So how are you not deputy anymore?" Deerflame asked more seriously.

"It's my punishment, from Reedstar," Heartstorm shrugged.

"sorry," mumbled Deerflame sheepishly.

"It's fine. It wasn't your fault," Heartstorm said.

"But he's my father," Deerflame sighed.

"I know, and he's the leader. He has to make hard decisions," Heartstorm said firmly. "You should not feel guilty." Deerflame didn't look so sure.

"Let's get back to camp," Heartstorm said. They padded back into camp where Reedstar had already called a Clan meeting. Heartstorm grimaced and slipped behind the crow, hiding behind everybody, trying to keep out of Reedstar's sight. Eelfrost and Deerflame sat by him. Heartstorm spotted Silverdrop and the kits peering out of the nursery and he felt a pang of guilt that he had not told her and she would find out like this.

"Cinderstar has passed away. Frogleap had predicted that she was to die in a few days but she has already passed on to StarClan... or the DarkForest. Heartstorm, our current deputy, has decided that he wants to- return to his old duties," Reedstar was saying. Murmuring and whispers broke out. Heartstorm shrank back into the shadows.

"So, as he wishes, he will be back to his normal warrior duties and I will appoint a new deputy," Reedstar announced. "I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors and our former deputy, Heartstorm, may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of RiverClan is Blacktail." Heartstorm watched happily as everybody cheered for Blacktail. He was happy for her. But this really meant he was not deputy anymore. He glanced at Silverdrop. The kits were frowning, Brightkit looked angry and Silverdrop whispered something into their ears. They scurried back into their den and Silverdrop turned her head to Heartstorm. He curled his tail around his hind paw. She had seen him. Eelfrost and Deerflame noticed and quickly slipped away. Silverdrop marched towards Heartstorm and he quickly pushed back into the bushes. She caught up with him. He made sure nobody else was watching.

"Why?" she asked. "Why'd you give up?"

"I didn't-" Heartstorm began.

"I know it was hard. I know being deputy was hard. But you were doing good. You were chosen, by Thornstar and Reedstar. And what does this show our kits? When it's too much, when it's too hard, to give up?" Silverdrop questioned looking disappointed. Heartstorm sighed.

"It didn't go like that," Heartstorm said. "I really was liking being deputy. It felt good, to help."

"So?" Silverdrop said.

"I- I killed Cinderstar," Heartstorm said.

"You what?" Silverdrop gasped. Heartstorm gulped, hating the look Silverdrop was giving him.

"I killed her. She was talking about my parents. Brightheart and Stormpelt... I just... I was so.. *angry*. I just killed her," Heartstorm explained, hoping with all his might Silverdrop would understand. She looked disgusted.

"You killed her," she whispered. Heartstorm wanted to cry.

"I'm sorry," he whispered hoarsely.

"But why did you chose not to be deputy?" asked Silverdrop.

"Reedstar's punishment," Heartstorm replied. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You shouldn't be... not to me anyways."

"I just- I was so angry."

"I understand." Heartstorm looked up. Silverdrop stared back at him, her eyes blue, perfection. She nuzzled him.

"What did she say?" Silverdrop murmured.

"Stormpelt cheated on Brightheart. She-she," Heartstorm trailed off, not wanting to think about it.

"Come and see the kits. They'll want an explanation. I know you can't tell them about Cinderstar but please make something up. Show them you didn't give up."

Ch. 12

Heartstorm woke up to a cold wind. He shivered and fluffed up his fur, stepping out of his nest. He trotted outside. Camp was covered in snow. Heartstorm brushed out of the warrior's den, noticing a few cats watching him and muttering. He spotted Blacktail and quickly trotted faster towards the nursery. But Blacktail caught up with him.

"Heartstorm," she said. Heartstorm turned to face her.

"Hi erm, congratulations," Heartstorm said.

"I didn't think my apprentice would give up when things get hard," Blacktail said questioningly.

"B-being deputy just wasn't for me," Heartstorm forced the lie out.

"I thought I taught you better," Blacktail said. "I had hope in you. My own apprentice, becoming deputy."

"I'm sorry," Heartstorm said, slightly annoyed. "But now you're deputy. Aren't you happy?"

"I don't understand why you gave up," Blacktail said.

"I need to go," Heartstorm said and pushed past her. He headed for the nursery and slipped inside. Cloudbreeze was talking to Heatherkit and Daisykit. Silverdrop smiled when Heartstorm entered the nursery. His kits squealed and ran up to him.

"It's snowing outside!" he told them.

"Can we go out?" Brightkit said, her eyes lit up.

"It's cold!" exclaimed Silverdrop.

"please," begged Bumblekit. Heatherkit trotted towards

them.

"Yeah, let's go together," she said.

"I'll watch them," Cloudbreeze promised Acornheart.

"I'll be there as well," Heartstorm agreed. The kits squealed.

"It's cold," Acornheart replied firmly.

"And there might be slippery ice," Silverdrop added. Cloudbreeze rolled his eyes at Heartstorm.

"We're warriors," he told Acornheart and Silverdrop. "We'll be able to take care of a couple of kits."

"Four kits," Acornheart said.

"Yes, we can take care of four kits," Cloudbreeze said.

"Please?" begged Daisykit.

"Come on! There's so many things to see," cried Bumblekit.

"Yeah! I've never seen snow before," Brightkit exclaimed.

"Fine," sighed Silverdrop, giving Heartstorm a firm look. "Take care of them." Acornheart relented as well and Cloudbreeze and Heartstorm trotted out of the den with four kits in tow. Brightkit and Bumblekit tumbled around in the snow. Heatherkit stared around in wonder and Daisykit started to roll about.

"Wow! It's so white!" exclaimed Bumblekit. The kits ran around, taking in all the new sights.

"Be careful!" called Silverdrop from inside the nursery.

"Of course we will!" answered Cloudbreeze.

"Come on," Heartstorm said, let's go to the stream, see if it's frozen." The kits all sprinted towards the stream with

Heartstorm and Cloudbreeze behind them. Heartstorm smiled when he spotted the stream. It was a silvery road of ice. The kits scrambled towards it happily. Bumblekit started to pad carefully on the ice until Heatherkit bumped into him and he sprawled. His eyes widened as he slipped around, trying to get up. Heartstorm laughed and picked him up.

"I don't really like ice," cringed Bumblekit. "My stomach hurts."

"Let me see," Heartstorm said. Bumblekit rolled over. Heartstorm peered at his stomach but it seemed fine. "Do you want to go see Frogleap?" Bumblekit nodded.

"Yes please," he mumbled, scrambling to his feet. Heartstorm didn't look forward to seeing Frogleap, not knowing what Frogleap would say to him.

"Cloudbreeze, take care of the kits alone for a while, please," Heartstorm called. Cloudbreeze nodded. "I'm taking Bumblekit to Frogleap." Bumblekit followed Heartstorm. They trotted towards the medicine den.

"What do you think Frogleap's going to do to me?" asked Bumblekit.

"Just check on you, I'm sure," Heartstorm assured Bumblekit. But Bumblekit wasn't scared. Mostly amazed.

"How does he know what he has to do?" asked Bumblekit.

"I expect the medicine cat before him knew," Heartstorm explained.

"What if he doesn't know what to do?" asked Bumblekit.

"He'll know. Go on in." They slipped into the dimly lit den. Frogleap looked up.

"Hello Bumblekit," he said, peering at Bumblekit curiously. Bumblekit trotted towards a pile of weird looking

leaves.

"What are those?" asked Bumblekit.

"Herbs," replied Frogleap. "Burdock root to be precise. And this is catmint. Many cats get greencough in leaf-bare. The worst time for a medicine cat. Last leaf-bare nobody got sick which made my job much easier, but you never know." Heartstorm stood by the corner, trying to avoid as much eye contact as he could.

"Well, back to you," Frogleap said, turning to Bumblekit. "Why are you here?"

"I fell on my stomach," explained Bumblekit. Frogleap nodded thoughtfully. He bent down.

"Show me," he said. Bumblekit rolled over. Frogleap nodded once again, pursing his lips.

"I know just the thing," Frogleap exclaimed. Frogleap peered at his pile of herbs and took out some green leaves. Heartstorm was surprised. He hadn't thought Bumblekit would have needed anything. He was a little more worried now. Frogleap crushed the leaves and applied it to Bumblekit's stomach.

"What's that?" asked Bumblekit.

"Comfrey," Frogleap replied. "Right, you're good. Run along now." Bumblekit smiled.

"Thanks," he grinned, gave another look at the pile of herbs and padded towards the den entrance. Frogleap approached Heartstorm. Heartstorm's heart raced, hoping Frogleap wouldn't say anything bad.

"The comfrey won't do anything," Frogleap whispered into Heartstorm's ear. "But it'll make him feel better about it." Heartstorm nodded thankfully and trotted after Bumblekit. So Bumblekit wasn't seriously hurt.

"Wow, my first real injury," exclaimed Bumblekit. Heartstorm chuckled.

"You're a very brave kit," Heartstorm said.

"What do you think Silverdrop will say?" asked Bumblekit happily.

"She'll probably shout at me," Heartstorm sighed. "Come on, let's go see your sister." They spotted the kits and Cloudbreeze my the stream, rolling about and wrestling. Cloudbreeze smiled.

"Better?" he asked. Heartstorm nodded.

"I'm healed now," smiled Bumblekit. Heartstorm grinned and settled down to watch his kits play around the frozen ground. He couldn't believe how big they were now. He'd miss them when they became apprentices in new-leaf. He watched them fondly, feeling the love for them warming his heart. His thoughts flickered to Sagekit. He imagined Sagekit there, playing with Bumblekit and Brightkit, smiling brightly. He imagined Sagekit, turning back to beam at him, his eyes lit up. As Heartstorm refocused, he stared at Bumblekit, Brightkit, Heatherkit and Daisykit... and Sagekit was gone.

Ch. 13

Heartstorm entered the den after a hunting patrol. He had only managed to catch a skinny squirrel and a sparrow with Sparkbelly. Times were getting harder as leaf-bare had started. Heartstorm padded across the frozen ground towards the elders den where Silverdrop and the kits were. Bumblekit was listening to Pigeonfeather attentively and Brightkit was practising fighting moves with Thornstar. Silverdrop chatted to Floodwhisker who, as always, looked ruffled and unhappy. Heartstorm gave her a small lick on the forehead.

"Hey, how was it?" asked Silverdrop.

"Not that good," sighed Heartstorm.

"It's always like that in leaf-bare," Floodwhisker mumbled. "And now we don't even have apprentices."

"Hi Heartstorm!" cried Bumblekit, jumping towards him. Heartstorm smiled.

"Hey," he replied, his eyes twinkling. "How was your day?"

"Pigeonfeather was telling me about a time when Frogleap saved him," Bumblekit told Heartstorm. "Frogleap is really good."

"Yes, he is," nodded Heartstorm amused. Thornstar swept out his paw and Brightkit leapt up. She flew over Thornstar's paw and tumbled to the ground. She quickly got up to face Thornstar once more.

"Brightkit is doing well, isn't she?" Heartstorm said. Silverdrop nodded.

"They've been fighting non stop," smiled Silverdrop.

"Can I go see Heatherkit?" asked Bumblekit.

"Of course," Heartstorm said. "Do you know where she is?"

"In the nursery," Bumblekit said. "Bye Silverdrop and Heartstorm." he trotted towards the nursery. Heartstorm watched as he emerged some time later with Heatherkit at his tail. They raced towards the medicine den. Heartstorm turned back to Silverdrop.

"How was your day?" he asked her. "Hope you're not getting too bored staying in camp all day."

"I stay in camp all day," Floodwhisker muttered.

"Not too boring," shrugged Silverdrop. "Can you watch Brightkit? I think I'm going to take a short walk." Heartstorm nodded and settled down, happy to see Floodwhisker closing his eyes. he didn't fancy talking to Floodwhisker. Heartstorm watched proudly as Brightkit fought with Thornstar. Thornstar kept correcting her and helping her.

"Right, I'm getting hungry," Thornstar said finally. "Would you be so kind to get us elders something to eat?" Brightkit nodded and sprinted away. Thornstar turned to Heartstorm.

"She's a very quick learner and very enthusiastic," Thornstar said.

"Yeah, she'll be a great warrior," Heartstorm agreed.

"I know she will," Thornstar nodded. "Great things will happen to her." Before Heartstorm could question Thornstar, Brightkit was back. She dropped the sparrow Heartstorm had hunted at Thornstar's feet.

"Thank you Brightkit," Thornstar dipped his head. "Pigeonfeather and I'll share."

"Can we fight more?" asked Brightkit, wriggling her tail. Thornstar gave a tired smile.

"Maybe tomorrow alright?" he said, flicking his tail. Brightkit sighed but nodded.

"Ok, I'll see you tomorrow!" she exclaimed and trotted to Heartstorm. "Can I eat?" Heartstorm nodded and got up, dipping his head to Thornstar. He padded with Brightkit towards the fresh-kill pile.

"So, learned anything new?" asked Heartstorm.

"Yeah! I can dodge any moves you throw at me!" exclaimed Brightkit. Heartstorm chuckled.

"You're going to have to show me later," Heartstorm said. They picked a small mouse and Heartstorm let Brightkit take a few bites first.

"I'm full," she said after a few mouthfuls then yawned.

"I saw that," smiled Heartstorm. "You're going back to the nursery to sleep early tonight."

"Awwww," moaned Brightkit. "Please? I'm not tired!" Heartstorm chuckled.

"I'll give you a few more minutes to stay up but just to find your brother at the medicine den," Heartstorm said. "Tell him to get back to the nursery." Brightkit sighed but nodded. She trotted away to find Bumblekit. Heartstorm gobbled up his mouse. Deerflame trotted towards him.

"hey, what's up?" asked Heartstorm.

"There isn't enough food," Deerflame said. "Reedstar ordered another hunting patrol. Can you come?" It was almost sunset.

"Sure," shrugged Heartstorm, although he felt extremely tired.

"Thanks," sighed Deerflame in relief. "Everybody else has gone on a hunting patrol and are already tired. And Greyspeck is getting tired... and weak. Frogleap's got him in the medicine den, in case he's got greencough." Heartstorm grimaced. Then quickly got up.

"I'll be right back," he told Deerflame and raced to the medicine den. He burst into the den and looked around. Frogleap was talking to Bumblekit while Brightkit and Heatherkit played at the side. He spotted Greyspeck sprawled on the ground in a nest.

"Frogleap, isn't Greyspeck sick?" Heartstorm exclaimed. "Kits, out." Heatherkit and Brightkit trotted out, talking excitedly.

"But Frogleap was-" Bumblekit begged.

"Bumblekit, out," Heartstorm said firmly. Bumblekit mumbled bye to Frogleap and trailed out.

"Why, don't want them to hang out with me?" Frogleap raised his eyebrows.

"Greyspeck is sick. Do you want the kits to be sick as well?" Heartstorm retorted.

"Who's the medicine cat here? I know when a cat is sick. Greyspeck is just weak and more prone to greencough. I'm keeping him here to make sure he doesn't catch it. Get him stronger," Frogleap replied.

"Right, sorry," muttered Heartstorm. "It's their bed time anyways."

"Yes of course," snorted Frogleap. "Goodbye." Heartstorm pushed out of the medicine den and herded the kits back towards the nursery. He settled them down with Acornheart then slipped out to find Deerflame. She was waiting with a grumpy looking Eelfrost and Rainfeather. She smiled at Heartstorm.

"Everybody else is exhausted," Deerflame said. "So we'll be four, but it's fine." She smiled and the four cats padded out of camp. Heartstorm ached to go back and sleep but he trudged after Deerflame.

"Did she force you into this?" Eelfrost whispered.

"Not really," replied Heartstorm wearily. He was regretting his choice.

"She did, I was sleeping," Eelfrost sighed. Heartstorm let out a small chuckle.

"I'd happily sleep right now. I've been to like three patrols today," Heartstorm agreed.

"I know right," Eelfrost nodded. "Well, two. But that's the same thing." Heartstorm laughed. A cold wind blew and Heartstorm cringed. He turned his face away. He looked up. It could have been night. The sky was covered in dark grey clouds and there was no light. The air was freezing and the ground covered in ice.

"Are you sure we should be hunting?" called out Eelfrost.

"Yeah," Deerflame replied, glaring at him.

"I mean, it looks like there' s going to be a storm," Eelfrost said.

"Not now, tomorrow morning probably," replied Rainfeather for Deerflame, gazing up. "So we need to fill the fresh kill pile just in case."

"Why just us?" grumbled Heartstorm.

"Reedstar will be sending out two more patrols," Deerflame replied.

"Are you his new deputy?" asked Eelfrost grumpily.

"I am not," replied Deerflame. "Look, let's just do it quick. I'll go with Rainfeather, you guys go together." Without being told twice, Heartstorm and Eelfrost turned away and made their way away from the two she-cats. A strong wind started to pick up, ruffling Heartstorm's fur. He grit his teeth and shook himself.

"StarClan! It's cold," he muttered.

"Can we just go back and say we couldn't find anything?" Eelfrost said.

"I'm really tempted," Heartstorm replied but he knew it

was their duty. What if there wasn't enough food. He couldn't imagine his kits and Silverdrop starving. He wouldn't let that happen. Suddenly, there was a loud crack and the sky lit up. Heartstorm halted and stared up at the sky. A blinding light flashed then disappeared.

"Lightning," Eelfrost groaned. "Great, let's go back. It's dangerous. There's definitely going to be a storm."

"We've gotta hunt," Heartstorm replied.

"But there's a snow storm coming!" complained Eelfrost.

"Imagine Embergaze, Softcry or Deerflame starving. Or anybody from the Clan starving. We can help," Heartstorm said. Eelfrost nodded and they trudged through the forest, listening and sniffing for food. All Heartstorm could smell was frosty cold and he could only see naked trees and the barren ground. It was hopeless, no animal would be out before a snow storm. And they shouldn't either. But Reedstar must've known what he was doing when he sent them on a hunting patrol. Heartstorm took a deep breath and told himself he could do it. Eelfrost wasn't even complaining anymore, just concentrated. Heartstorm told himself if Eelfrost could do it, so could he. They finally heard a bird squawk but it fluttered away before they could reach it, screeching angrily. Heartstorm sighed. Eelfrost sunk to the ground and Heartstorm made no move to stop him. The wind had picked up and Heartstorm fur was being blown around. He looked up. The sky was darker than ever, as if it was a night without any moon or stars. Heartstorm shivered.

"I think it's time to get back," Eelfrost said through chattering teeth. Heartstorm couldn't agree any less. Suddenly, Deerflame and Rainfeather burst through the trees.

"It's a big snowstorm!" yelled Deerflame, tugging Eelfrost to his feet. "Come on, we need to get back to camp!"

"Just a moment ago you said it wouldn't come till tomorrow," replied Eelfrost. Rainfeather flicked her tail.

"Eelfrost shut up," she snapped. "Now come on." Suddenly, a large gust of wind hurtled towards them. Ice stung Heartstorm's skin and he had to narrow his eyes.

"Not a snowstorm," Rainfeather growled. "A hailstorm." All four cats snapped to attention and hurtled towards camp. Heartstorm pelted after Deerflame, Rainfeather and Eelfrost. Together, they leapt over a fallen tree and dodged large roots. Finally they spotted camp. The wind was whistling beside them. Heartstorm's eyes stung and his whole body was cold. As they broke into camp, they found it in chaos. Cats were everywhere, yelling orders and closing up den entrances. Reedstar spotted them and he sighed in relief, seeing Deerflame and Rainfeather.

"The other patrols aren't back yet," he told them. "Deerflame and Rainfeather, get into the warrior's den and patch up holes from inside. Eelfrost patch up as many wholes around the camp. Ask Blacktail if you don't know with what. And Heartstorm you go to the nursery." Heartstorm nodded in relief. He ran towards the nursery where Cloudbreeze and Sparkbelly were already patching up. The wind was so strong, Heartstorm felt as if it would sweep them off his feet. Ice everywhere was being thrown around and snow had started to fall. Heartstorm started to help Cloudbreeze and Sparkbelly, pushing branches, rocks, leaves, anything he could in front of the nursery. He could hear Bumblekit and Brightkit shooting questions from inside to Silverdrop and he imagined her calm voice, replying them. Heartstorm's heart raced as he searched for anything he could find. Suddenly, the snow reached up to his knees. A shout rang out.

"Into your dens!" hollered Reedstar. "Everybody into a den! Nobody goes into the apprentice den! One warrior at least in each den!"

Ch. 14

Heartstorm heard shouting and saw shapes through the snow as they trudged back towards their dens. Heartstorm headed for the nursery. The snow had picked up quickly. It battered at his face. Soon, he felt ice clinging to his fur, weighing him down. He felt himself being pulled down into the snow. He trembled hard but he kept moving towards the nursery. He could hardly see or open his eyes due to the snow. Soon, there was not only snow, small balls of hard hails pelted down. Heartstorm felt it hit his back and pain seared through him. He cried out in pain but nobody heard him. He couldn't even hear himself. He knew others were also struggling to get back into their dens. The barrier around camp was helping keep out the worst of the storm but Heartstorm couldn't imagine what it would be like outside camp. He hoped the patrols had gotten back in safely. Heartstorm kept going, keeping his head down. Hail hit his head and he felt dizzy. He couldn't move anymore. he didn't know if he was upright or not. Suddenly, he felt something grab his scruff. His muscles gave in. He was being dragged. The snow seeped into his fur, freezing his skin.

"Come on, you can help a bit," muttered the voice through clenched teeth. Sparkbelly. Heartstorm struggled to get up and with Sparkbelly pulling him, they made it to the nursery's entrance. They stumbled inside. Heartstorm collapsed onto the soft floor. Nothing was hitting his back. He trembled, lying on the ground, glad for some calm. He heard Sparkbelly coughing and slumping down beside him. Suddenly, Heartstorm was aware of something warm being pressed against him and even warmer words in his ears.

"Heartstorm," Silverdrop whispered. He opened his mouth to reply but he couldn't. He just grimaced in pain. His whole body was burning in pain. Slowly, the loud noise of hail outside was just a background noise to Heartstorm an he opened his eyes. He slowly heaved himself up.

"don't get up," Cloudbreeze ordered. "Just sit up."

Heartstorm slowly sat up. Brightkit and Bumblekit looked up at him with wide eyes.

"How are you feeling?" asked Silverdrop. "Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere," Heartstorm groaned.

"You're bleeding," Silverdrop told him, licking his cheek. He looked down at his side, blood poured down from his back and the top of his head was bleeding from the hail.

"All we can do is lick it to clean it," Cloudbreeze told Heartstorm. Silverdrop licked his wounds.

"WHere's Sparkbelly?" asked Heartstorm. He turned around and spotted Sparkbelly, a heap on the ground. His heart dropped. "I-is he.. ok?" Sparkbelly had saved his life. Sparkbelly had risked his life for Heartstorm. Heartstorm felt guilt and worry rise in his throat.

"He's... alive," Acornheart said. She was licking a wound on his stomach. Daisykit and Heatherkit cowered at the side.

"He'll be alright.., right?" Heartstorm said hoarsely.

"I'm sorry Heartstorm," whispered Bumblekit. "I don't have any herbs to put on any of your wounds. I wish Frogleap was here."

"It's ok honey, go back to sleep," Heartstorm murmured although he knew the kits weren't about to sleep.

"You should rest," Cloudbreeze said. "Nobody knows how to treat these wounds except licking it and rest." Heartstorm nodded. His head was swimming so he slowly lowered himself to the soft but cold ground. He didn't want to sleep knowing a storm was raging and Sparkbelly was hurt but slowly, sleep pulled him in.

Ch. 15

"Has it stopped?" a faraway voice asked.

"It's lessened," another voice replied.

"It doesn't sound as loud."

"Should I go out to check?"

"Maybe it's lessened enough so we can get Frogleap." Heartstorm slowly blinked his eyes open. Slowly, he adjusted and looked around. Silverdrop, Cloudbreeze and Acornheart were talking together. Brightkit was listening and adding in her suggestions. She noticed Heartstorm awake and rushed to him. She cuddled into his fur.

"Hi Heartstorm," she whispered. Bumblekit spotted them and trotted to them as well. He curled up beside Brightkit.

"Heartstorm," Silverdrop said. "You're awake." She hurried to his side and gave him a lick on the cheek. "We don't think it's hailing anymore. We might be able to get out."

"No," Heartstorm said hoarsely. "You can't. You've got to wait t-till Reedstar or Blacktail comes."

"But you and Sparkbelly are hurt. He hasn't woken up yet," Silverdrop whispered. Heartstorm turned his head to Sparkbelly. Sparkbelly was motionless. He barely looked alive. Heartstorm pushed down the rising emotions.

"Don't go," he whispered to Silverdrop. She sighed.

"It's still snowing," Cloudbreeze said. "Very hard."

"When will it stop?" Acornheart thought aloud.

"Better be soon," Cloudbreeze muttered. The nursery was getting colder. Heartstorm could feel the cold creeping in and pushing past his fur to tickle his skin. He shivered and curled up closer, covering his kits from the cold.

"Come on kits," Acornheart said, herding her kits towards the back of the den. "It's warmer here." Everybody joined them, huddling together to keep warm. The wind howling outside was now normal to Heartstorm's ears and the drumming of hard snow and ice pounding on the side of the den was just a background noise.

"We need to keep Sparkbelly warm," Silverdrop said. They all lay by Sparkbelly. Heartstorm touched his tail to Sparkbelly's shoulder. It was cold and stained with blood. Heartstorm gulped.

"You think he's going to live?" Heartstorm asked softly. Silverdrop gazed at Sparkbelly.

"I don't know," answered Silverdrop. Bumblekit looked up.

"He is going to live," Bumblekit told them. "You guys licked the wounds clean and he's sleeping so once Frogleap helps him, he'll be all good." Heartstorm smiled sadly.

"Hopefully Bumblekit," agreed Silverdrop. "Go to sleep now." Heartstorm closed his eyes as well, feeling Bumblekit and Brightkit moving beside him. He let the comforting feeling that his kits and Silverdrop were alright lull him to sleep.

Heartstorm woke up knowing something was different. He opened his eyes gently. He listened carefully. The hard beating of hail and snow was gone. He slowly got up. The cats around him were starting to wake as well. Heartstorm listened carefully. He could still hear the swishing of loud wind outside but it everything seemed much more quiet. He let out a small sigh.

"It stopped hailing!" yelled Brightkit.

"Can we go out?" squealed Daisykit. Acornheart frowned and shook her head.

"I'll check," said Silverdrop. Heartstorm opened his mouth to object but Cloudbreeze blocked Silverdrop's path for him.

"*I'll* check," Cloudbreeze assured. He padded to the entrance of the nursery and pressed his nose to the entrance. He pushes slightly. A few twigs moved, letting a cold wind rush through. Heartstorm shivered and pulled his kits nearer to him. Cloudbreeze blinked and pushed his eye against the opening.

"Are you alright?" called Acornheart worriedly. Cloudbreeze closed the hole.

"There's still a lot of wind and the place is covered in snow but it's stopped hailing. It's snowing though," Cloudbreeze reported. Silverdrop glanced nervously at Sparkbelly.

"Do you think we could bring him to the nursery?" asked Silverdrop. Cloudbreeze shook his head.

"I could go fetch Frogleap though," he suggested. Acornheart frowned, not wanting to accept.

"Acornheart, I'm the only one here who could walk out there right now," he said firmly. "Don't look at me like that."

"I can," Silverdrop put in bravely.

"Silverdrop," Heartstorm warned, getting up slowly. His back seared with pain. He winced.

"Heartstorm, I'm a warrior. I'm perfectly strong enough to go out there. And so is Acornheart," Silverdrop said firmly. "But she's not going. I am."

"No Silverdrop," Cloudbreeze said firmly. "You and Acornheart are not warriors, you are both queens. I am going."

"Cloudbreeze!" Acornheart cried.

"Acornheart," Cloudbreeze said gently. "I'll be fine. I've seen what it's like outside. Stay put." Cloudbreeze then pushed through the twigs and protection and out of the nursery. Acornheart and Silverdrop rushed to cover it up. Snow fluttered into the nursery and a cold wind swept around. Bumblekit and Brightkit wriggled closer to Heartstorm. Acornheart looked down as she returned to her kits.

"Don't worry Acornheart," Heartstorm assured. "Cloudbreeze is strong, he knows what he's doing." Acornheart nodded numbly and pulled her kits closer to her. They waited in silence. Heartstorm could practically hear everybody's heartbeats. After what seemed like years, Heartstorm finally heard something different. Some scraping at the entrance of the den then a muffled voice.

"Open up you mouse-brains!" yelled Frogleap's gruff voice. Everybody, save Sparkbelly, scrambled to their feet. Silverdrop brushed her tail onto Heartstorm's back.

"Lay down," she told him. Heartstorm settled back down, watching nervously as Acornheart and Silverdrop started to help make an opening into the nursery. Suddenly, a cold wind blew into the den and Cloudbreeze and Frogleap scrambled in. Frogleap headed straight to Sparkbelly after eyeing Heartstorm's wounds while Cloudbreeze, Silverdrop and Acornheart covered the entrance once more. The kits ran about, not knowing what to be helping with. Heartstorm watched as Frogleap, herbs clenched in his jaws, started to examine Sparkbelly. Bumblekit sat beside Frogleap, looking at him worriedly.

"What are you going to give him?" asked Bumblekit softly.

"I've got Goldenrod, some marigold, wild garlic, bramble twigs, which we will not need, ferns and yarrow," explained Frogleap. Heartstorm had never seen him like that, nice and calm.

"I'm not going to need the marigold or ferns, the wound is clean," Frogleap said as he worked. He applied yarrow to Sparkbelly's wounds. "We don't need the bramble twigs. I thought we might in case it would help Heartstorm or Sparkbelly sleep but

Sparkbelly's already sleeping and Heartstorm will be fine awake." Bumblekit nodded, listening intently and watching the procedure in interest. Heartstorm watched as well in interest and hope that Sparkbelly would be fine.

"He's going to be ok?" asked Heartstorm.

"Yes, I am here now, of course he's going to be ok," replied Frogleap.

Ch. 16

Heartstorm crinkled up his nose. The yarrow didn't exactly smell good or feel good. It sent tickling sensations and it made him feel sticky. But Sparkbelly was literally covered in yarrow and other herbs Frogleap had explained but Heartstorm had forgotten. Heartstorm lay listening in the medicine den. Sparkbelly was laid out in one of the nests beside him and was snoring gently. Greyspeck was sitting by the medicine den entrance, waiting to be let in Outside, cats were talking and shouting loudly. Every now and then, cats would pass the medicine den running our come in asking for herbs. Heartstorm had limped to the medicine den after the storm and had been shocked by the state of camp. It was a mess. Dens were broken, twigs and large branches had been swept into camp. The snow was so high it covered half the entrance to the dens and the walls to camp had been destroyed. Heartstorm had stared sadly at their wrecked camp. His home. He ached to go out and help fix camp but Frogleap had insisted he stayed inside. Heartstorm wanted to help put camp back to normal so he could see his old home once more. It filled him with sadness, seeing it destroyed and in chaos. Reedstar and Blacktail were shouting out orders and Heartstorm felt a guilty he couldn't be there to help.

"We need border patrols!" Reedstar was yelling. "We're so busy here but other Clans might chose this time to attack." Heartstorm grit his teeth, forcing himself not to run out and volunteer. The medicine den seemed quiet compared to the rest of camp. Suddenly, Eelfrost, wet and muddy burst into the medicine den.

"Are you ok?" he exclaimed. "I heard from Silverdrop. And how's Sparkbelly?"

"I'm fine. Sparkbelly saved me," Heartstorm assured Eelfrost.

"Oh, that's what Silverdrop said as well. Guess he's not as stupid as I thought. Anyways, gotta run," Eelfrost said. "Hope you get better Sparkbelly!" He ran out of the medicine den. Heartstorm

chuckled. Reedstar padded into the medicine den next.

"Where's Frogleap?" asked Reedstar. Heartstorm shrugged. "We don't have enough cats for patrol..." Reedstar muttered to himself.

"I can go," Heartstorm volunteered. Reedstar shook his head.

"You can't," he said firmly. "Deerflame! Move that log over there!" Heartstorm sighed.

"Reedstar!" he called. Reedstar turned back.

"Yes Heartstorm?" Reedstar asked annoyed.

"I'm sure I can at least go on a border patrol," Heartstorm begged. Reedstar narrowed his eyes. He turned and Heartstorm knew it was a no.

"Alright, you can go. Only because we really need as many cats as possible. But once the patrol's over, back in the medicine den," ordered Reedstar sternly. Heartstorm grinned and sprung to his feet. He winced in pain but quickly righted his face and smiled at Reedstar. Reedstar sighed and padded away. Heartstorm trotted outside. The place was chaos. Cats ran about, shouting orders, asking for help. They were patching up the camp or moving things out of the way. There were Twoleg things everywhere and the floor was littered with all kinds of things. Heartstorm cringed. He walked towards the camp entrance. Smoketail, Beestripe and Stripedfur were waiting.

"You're the fourth cat?" asked Smoketail.

"Yeah," replied Heartstorm.

"You're sure you're up for it?" asked Beestripe.

"Yeah, of course," Heartstorm replied. Smoketail shrugged and they slipped out of camp. They made their way towards WindClan territory.

"Ah, peace and quiet," muttered Smoketail as they ploughed through thick snow. Heartstorm's wounds prickled but he didn't make a sound. The air was cold and fresh. It felt good. They finally reached WindClan. Heartstorm smelt the sharp and scent of WindClan. It seemed as if it was in their territory.

"Think the wind was so strong their scent came into our territory?" asked Heartstorm.

"No, WindClan is here," Smoketail growled. They all kept their eyes out and were sharp. They swivelled around at any noise and growled at any different scent. Heartstorm broke apart from the group and pushed through the snow down towards the river. His muscles ached and were yelling at him to stop but he kept going, determined to make sure nobody had trespassed. Suddenly, he heard whimpers. His ears sharpened and he glanced around. He advanced towards the noise slowly. There was another noise. Heartstorm stared at the snow in front of him then started to dig. As he dug deeper, he heard another whimpering. Then he spotted a clump of dark brown fur. Heartstorm frowned and kept digging, harder and harder. His shoulders and muscles burnt but he didn't care. He uncovered a stomach then slowly, a tail and then a head. A sleek, dark furred cat was unconscious in the snow. The cat was curled in a weird way and its tail was frozen and as hard as a stick. Heartstorm felt his stomach lurch. As he peered closer, he realised, nestled in the cat's fur were two forms. Kits.

Ch. 17

"Smoketail! Stripedfur! Beestripe! Get here!" hollered Heartstorm, his eyes glued to the three cats. "Now!" He bent down and touched his nose to one of the kits. Please don't be dead. Please don't be dead. He pushed the kit lightly. Then he licked it. Its fur was freezing. The dark tom's fur was covered in ice and icicles hung around it but it seemed, he had protected the kits from the worst. There was some rustling and Smoketail, Stripedfur and Beestripe appeared in the snow.

"What is-?" Smoketail asked.

"K-kits!" gasped Stripedfur. She leapt forwards and started to lick one.

"WindClan," put in Smoketail.

"They need help," Stripedfur said firmly. "Don't look at me like that Smoketail." Smoketail huffed. Heartstorm continued licking one of the kits while Stripedfur licked the other. Beestripe checked the unconscious tom.

"He's-he's," Beestripe stammered, frowning in concentration, "alive!" Heartstorm sighed in relief.

"My kit is too," Stripedfur said, in between licks. "How about yours?" Heartstorm touched his ear to the kit's heart. He listened hard. He needed to hear the heartbeat. Suddenly, he felt a faint thud. Then another.

"Alive!" he exclaimed.

"Great!" cried Stripedfur. "Smoketail and Beestripe, bring the tom back. Heartstorm and I will bring the kits back so they can be checked immediately." Smoketail grumpily nodded and helped hold onto the frozen tom. Heartstorm took the kit in his mouth gently, thinking back to Sagekit. He needed to keep this kit safe.

This kit needed to live. He pushed through the snow after Stripedfur and headed to camp as quickly as he could. His heart beat fast. He wouldn't be responsible for another kit's death. He could not. This kit had a whole life ahead of him. Could become a leader, a medicine cat, even a rogue. Heartstorm would make sure the kit could have it. They burst into camp. Through the chaos, not many cats noticed them. Then Blacktail spotted them. Her eyes went wide when she saw the kits but she didn't ask any questions. A few cats stopped at the faint smell of WindClan.

"Frogleap's in the medicine den," Blacktail immediately told Heartstorm and Stripedfur. They nodded and ducked into the medicine den. Frogleap was tending to Sparkbelly. When he spotted Heartstorm, he growled.

"How dare you leave against my orders?" he bellowed. "I told you not to go! I told you, you weren't-" He stared at the kits. Heartstorm didn't know what to say. But Frogleap quickly hurried to them and picked the kits from them, plopping them into one of the large nests. Then he was muttering under his breath as he searched for leaves.

"Well?" Frogleap snapped, mouth full of leaves. "Are you going to help?" Heartstorm and Stripedfur rushed to his aid by the nest.

"Lick them, keep' em warm," Frogleap barked. They nodded and did as they were told. Frogleap checked them up and made tended to them. Finally, he finished.

"They will be ok," he murmured. He looked worried.

"Should-" Stripedfur was cut off.

"You can leave. Heartstorm, you're not to go out again. And you can stay in this nest with the kits and keep them warm in your fur," Frogleap barked. Heartstorm didn't dare disobey Frogleap this time and he wanted to help the kits. He curled up beside them, pushing them into his fur for warmth. He shivered as he felt their coldness press onto his stomach but he felt one shudder and sighed in relief. At least they were starting to respond. Heartstorm let them

soak in his warmth, closing his eyes.

Heartstorm blinked his eyes open. Something was squirming under him. He looked down at two kits. They were wide awake now. One was dark brown and the other was white. As Heartstorm looked around, he spotted the large tom in another nest. He eyed Heartstorm.

"You're awake," he said, looking at the kits. "Why can't I have the kits?" The cat's voice was pleading, sad. "Please... are they alright?"

"You are to rest," Frogleap snapped, walking into the den. "Heartstorm is with the kits. They're alright." Heartstorm cocked his head.

"How are you?" he asked. The cat looked much better. Warmth seemed to have seeped back into him.

"Better," he said. "My kits...." Heartstorm's heart softened. Those were his kits! He made a move to give the kits back to the tom but Frogleap shook his head.

"You can take care of them, can't you?" he asked. "And you must rest." The tom sighed, watching his kits with love.

"What's your name?" asked Heartstorm.

"Ravenfall," the tom said. "That's Lilykit and Crowkit." Heartstorm smiled at the kits. Crowkit meowed. Heartstorm gave it a small lick on the head.

"Mum?" meowed Crowkit softly. Ravenfall leapt to his feet. Frogleap jumped at him angrily but Ravenfall pushed past him, frail but still defiant. He bent down and licked Crowkit gently.

"Crowkit. It's me, Ravenfall," whispered Ravenfall.

"Ravenfall?" whispered back Crowkit. "Where's mum?"

"She's.... not here," said Ravenfall gently.

"Why not?" asked Crowkit. "Why does it smell weird? Who's that?" Crowkit looked up at Heartstorm.

"This is erm... Heartstorm," Ravenfall said. "We are- in RiverClan." Crowkit's eyes widened.

"RiverClan!" he gasped.

"Yes!" said Ravenfall then more firmly. "They helped us alright? So be nice." Ravenfall gave Crowkit a meaningful look. Crowkit frowned but nodded.

"Right, Ravenfall, back to the nest," ordered Frogleap sternly. Ravenfall padded back to his nest without taking his eyes off his kits. Frogleap gave all of them a meaningful look and stalked off.

"Snowstorms.., huh?" Heartstorm said grimly.

"Yeah. Haven't seen anything like it," shuddered Ravenfall. "I hope Cloverwish is alright...." Heartstorm guessed it was his mate. "The kits ran out of camp."

"I went after them. They made it all the way to the river and found the tunnel. Don't know how they did it. They started to cross it. I yelled at them. The snow and wind was already blowing. Then Lilykit was on the otherside. So I ran to get her. Crowkit followed me. I lost Lilykit. I tried to get Crowkit into shelter while looking for her. Then it really hit. Finally found Lilykit. There was nothing to do. I curled up around them, hoping I'd keep the worst away from them," Ravenfall said, looking into space. Heartstorm frowned, knowing how hard it must have been.

"Lucky you found us," Ravenfall said.

"Yeah," nodded Heartstorm bleakly.

"Thanks," muttered Ravenfall, looking away.

"Camp's a mess," sighed Heartstorm. "Wish I could be out there helping."

"Me too. I hope WindClan is alright," sighed Ravenfall.

"I'm hungry," murmured Crowkit. Ravenfall looked worried.

"I can ask Frogleap to get you food," suggested Heartstorm. Ravenfall seemed relieved. Deerflame suddenly ran into the medicine den, her eyes wide.

"I heard what happened. Are you ok?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure," nodded Heartstorm.

"You must be Ravenfall. Oooh, and Crowkit and Lilykit," cooed Deerflame. Ravenfall smiled and nodded.

"I'm Deerflame," Deerflame said then turned to Heartstorm. "Need anything? I'm supposed to check on Sparkbelly and the kits." She peered at Lilykit and winced.

"Got any food?" asked Heartstorm. Deerflame grimaced.

"Some. A few warriors brought it into the den with them. We're keeping it," Deerflame explained.

"Crowkit's hungry," said Heartstorm. Deerflame looked worried but Ravenfall even more. Heartstorm knew Ravenfall must be thinking RiverClan wouldn't give away their food to another Clan's kit.

"I'll see what I can do," Deerflame said finally. She smiled and padded out of the den. Ravenfall nodded feebly.

"She'll get him food," Heartstorm assured Ravenfall. Ravenfall just gulped and gave a half shrug. Heartstorm looked down at the kits. Lilykit was sleeping gently and Crowkit had started to go back to sleep once more. Heartstorm was filled with a warm feeling as he watched them. He hadn't failed them. They were alive. He just hoped Lilykit would be alright.

Ch. 18

"Do they bury kits if they're bad?" asked Crowkit. Lilykit drowsily snuggled closer to Ravenfall. Heartstorm chuckled.

"I've never seen that happen," confessed Heartstorm. "But sometimes, Lionbreeze would disappear when he was a kit. You never know, they could've buried him. He was not a very obedient kit." Ravenfall rolled his eyes. Crowkit had bombarded Heartstorm with questions about his time in ShadowClan. Heartstorm pricked his ears, hearing a commotion outside. It wasn't very rare nowadays. Cats had been passing the medicine every few seconds, the shouting was normal and the grumbling even more common. Heartstorm knew that the camp was slowly going back to normal and really wanted to help but he liked talking to Crowkit as well.

"You know, you should not believe stupid rumours," purred Ravenfall.

"But Heartstorm confirmed!" exclaimed Crowkit. Reedstar padded into the camp. Ravenfall dipped his head in respect. Reedstar nodded in his direction.

"How are you doing Heartstorm?" he asked, eyeing Sparkbelly who was sprawled in his nest. Heartstorm tried not to look at Sparkbelly as little as possible. He didn't like thinking that Sparkbelly would never wake up because of him. Too many things were because of him.

"Good thank you," Heartstorm smiled.

"Ravenfall," said Reedstar. This was the first time Reedstar had come to visit Ravenfall and the kits. He looked deep in thought. "I am glad you and your kits are healing. And safe."

"Thank you," mumbled Ravenfall awkwardly, his tail twitching.

"I trust Frogleap is taking care of the kits," Reedstar said.

"Yes, thank you," murmured Ravenfall.

"He will tell me when you and the kits are in good enough health," Reedstar nodded then added, "and you will be able to return to WindClan." Reedstar smiled at Heartstorm and swivelled around, padding out of the den. Heartstorm turned to Ravenfall.

"Forgot for a moment we were still in RiverClan," muttered Ravenfall with a sigh. He glanced at Lilykit.

"I like it here," piped in Crowkit.

"We will be going back to WindClan as soon as Lilykit is better," Ravenfall told Crowkit firmly. Heartstorm turned away. He knew that although they were friendly and he had grown to like the kits, they were different Clans. Too close relationships didn't work. He gulped and rested his head on his paws. Frogleap bustled in.

"Reedstar came to visit?" Frogleap said with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah," nodded Heartstorm.

"You should be good to go tomorrow," Frogleap told Heartstorm approvingly. Heartstorm smiled. Just then there was some high pitched squealing and Brightkit and Bumblekit tumbled into the medicine den. Only Silverdrop had visited Heartstorm the past few days.

"Heartstorm!" exclaimed Brightkit. She ran to him and he embraced her. He was filled with a warm feeling and licked her lovingly on the head. Bumblekit joined them, beaming brightly, purring. Heartstorm smiled and gave Bumblekit a loving nudge.

"How are you its doing?" he asked.

"Good," said Bumblekit. "Silverdrop said we had to let

you rest before we could come."

"Ah, well, thank you," Heartstorm nodded.

"Who are you?" asked Crowkit, peering at Bumblekit and Brightkit weirdly.

"I'm Brightkit," Brightkit said, puffing out her chest.

"I'm Bumblekit," Bumblekit smiled.

"Oh," said Crowkit. "I'm Crowkit."

"Hi Crowkit," Brightkit said pointedly. "You're *WindClan*."

"Hello kits," put in Ravenfall with a smile. "Heartstorm's told me a lot about you."

"Like what?" asked Brightkit suspiciously.

"Nice, good things," assured Ravenfall. "Like how you will be apprentices in three moons...?" He raised his eyebrow at Heartstorm. Heartstorm nodded approvingly.

"Well, I am going to be the best warrior ever," said Brightkit. Crowkit was giving Brightkit a weird look. He almost looked awed.

"I know you are," he muttered. Ravenfall chuckled.

"Hey Heartstorm, how you doing?" came a sweet voice. Heartstorm couldn't help but smile wider. Silverdrop slipped in. She nuzzled him gently.

"What's going on out there?" he asked her as Brightkit and Bumblekit chatted with Crowkit and Ravenfall.

"Camp is looking better. It's mostly the walls around the camp," Silverdrop told him, giving him an affectionate lick behind the ear. "They need a lot of fixing. The food pile is low. And the patrols are very few, we need more. But we're dealing with

it." Silverdrop glanced at Sparkbelly.

"Any news?" she asked.

"He woke up a few times. But he doesn't say much...," sighed Heartstorm, filled with dread. "Frogleap says he's going to be ok."

"Then he will," Silverdrop said firmly then flicked her tail at the kits. "Come on, let your father rest. When you out?"

"Tomorrow morning," Heartstorm grinned. Silverdrop smiled back.

"I'm so glad," she said. "I'll come tonight. Come on kits!" Brightkit and Bumblekit trotted after her, shouting their goodbyes. They pushed out of the medicine den.

Ch. 19

Heartstorm woke up with a start. He suddenly remembered. He was allowed to move out of the medicine den! He jumped to his feet then quickly turned to see if he had disturbed Ravenfall or the kits. He saw Sparkbelly sleeping gently, so peacefully. He bit back guilt and slipped out of the medicine den. He stood outside, staring around at camp. Twigs and all kinds of things lay on the ground. There was a large pile near the High Rock with many twigs and random things Heartstorm didn't know what they were. The walls around RiverClan were almost destroyed. The trees and bushes which had been growing tightly around RiverClan, keeping it safe, were either gone or a big mess on the ground. He looked past the apprentice den where a large gap was. He gaped. A few cats were already busying themselves, cleaning whatever was left of the debris. Reedstar padded towards Heartstorm.

"Good to have you back," he smiled.

"Is there anything I can start with?" Heartstorm asked, still a bit shocked at the state camp was in.

"Hunting patrol. We haven't had enough time for everything and I'm sure half of the Clan haven't eaten for a day," Reedstar said. Heartstorm nodded and padded into the warrior's den. Greyspeck had returned to the warrior's den after being cleared by Frogleap. Hawkflight was starting to move. He opened his eyes and spotted Heartstorm. He grinned and got up.

"Hey! How are you?" he asked. Heartstorm smiled, looking proudly at Hawkflight. He recalled Hawkflight when he was an apprentice. He remembered teaching Hawkflight about swimming and hunting. He remembered telling Hawkflight not to be guilty when killing prey. He remembered Hawkflight's troubles with hunting.

"Fancy going on a hunting patrol with me?" grinned Heartstorm.

"Sure," grinned back Hawkflight. Heartstorm approached Eelfrost's father, Embergaze.

"Hey Embergaze...," Heartstorm nudged. "Do you want to come on a hunting patrol with su?" Embergaze slowly opened his eyes and stretched. He nodded silently.

"Can I come?" asked a sleepy voice. It was Rosebriar.

"Sure," said Heartstorm with a smile.

"You're out of the medicine den," smiled Rosebriar sleepily. "Happy you're better."

"Thanks," Heartstorm said. Just then, Blacktail padded into the den.

"Heartstorm!" she exclaimed. "Good to have you back. Feeling better?" Heartstorm nodded at his former mentor. "The patrols are to four cats now. We can't force you to have five cats for each patrols when we are really needing more help in camp." Heartstorm nodded then flicked his tail.

"Right then, let's go," he said. The three cats followed him. They brushed out of the tunnel and into the forest. Hawkflight trotted beside Heartstorm. There were crunches as they stepped on crisp snow.

"So how's Sparkbelly?" asked Hawkflight. "Apparently he's a hero."

"Yes," Heartstorm agreed, "he saved my life."

"I'm happy you're better," Hawkflight said finally. They padded in silence, listening to the sounds around them. Rosebriar joined Heartstorm and Hawkflight's side.

"Sparkbelly's going to be ok though, right?" she asked.

"Yes, Frogleap said he'll be alright," Heartstorm said firmly. He had to believe it.

"Right...," nodded Rosebriar. "Well, if Frogleap says so."

"Yeah, there's no arguing with Frogleap," nodded Hawkflight.

"Listen," Heartstorm said halting. He pricked his ears. He had heard something. A small crunch of the snow. A bit like scuttling. He knew it hadn't been their footsteps. It must be a stray mouse. The rest of the patrol halted and listened. There was another noise. Heartstorm nodded to Hawkflight. Slowly, he brought his foot up and then back down onto the snow, careful not to make a sound. Achingly slow, he edged towards the tree where they had heard the noise. Heartstorm flicked his tail at Rosebriar. She stalked further from the other side of the tree. Embergaze crept behind and finally, Heartstorm headed towards the tree. They had surrounded the mouse. Minutes crept by slowly and finally, Heartstorm reached the tree and stood still. He peered around and saw at the base of the tree a small skinny mouse. He waited. Finally, he saw Embergaze on the other side. They had surrounded the mouse. Swiftly, Heartstorm leapt out and swept his paw at the mouse. He heard a squeak and felt something warm in his claws. The mouse squirmed and before Heartstorm knew it, it was scurrying away. Hawkflight leapt out from the side and swiped at it. It dodged. Then Rosebriar ran at it, making it turn towards Embergaze. Embergaze, without a noise, caught the mouse between his teeth and killed it.

"Nice catch," panted Rosebriar. Heartstorm let out a sigh of relief. Hawkflight smiled.

"Good work," Heartstorm commented. They set off once more after burying the mouse.

Hunting had taken them most of the day. By afternoon, they returned to camp, tired and aching. After long hours of watching, stalking and waiting, they had finally come back with a pigeon, two mice, a vole and two sparrows. They entered camp. Cats bustled about, cleaning. The camp floor was no longer littered with twigs but seemed mostly clean. the pile beside the High Rock though was very high and Heartstorm wondered what they were going to do with it. Heartstorm headed for the fresh-kill pile with his mouth full

of mice. He dropped the mouse in and thought about his kits. He needed to make sure they had eaten. He picked up the mouse again, nodded at his patrol and headed towards the nursery. He slipped inside. Silverdrop was telling the kits a story. Brightkit and Bumblekit turned to Heartstorm, their eyes bright. They squealed and ran at him.

"Is that for us?" they asked excitedly. Heartstorm smiled and nodded. He dropped the mouse at their feet.

"They haven't eaten since last night," Silverdrop nodded, watching them happily. "I'm so happy you're out. Nice to have you back." She gave him an affectionate lick on the cheek. Heartstorm purred, watching the kits nibble at the mouse. They finished half of it and Heartstorm pushed the rest to Silverdrop.

"You've been out hunting all day," she said, shaking her head. "You eat it. "

"I'm alright," Heartstorm assured her. His stomach gave a hungry and longing growl and grumbled. Silverdrop raised her eyes and pushed the mouse towards Heartstorm.

"We'll share," he sighed. Silverdrop nodded with a smile. They took small bites of the mouse. Even if it was skinny and not very tasty, it was a relief. Heartstorm felt like every bite was heaven. He savoured each bite. He hadn't realised how hungry he had been.

"How is Sparkbelly doing?" asked Silverdrop.

"Better...," Heartstorm shrugged. "I'm going to see him later."

"Can we go see Crowkit?" asked Brightkit brightly.

"They'll be resting," Silverdrop said.

"But it's afternoon!" Bumblekit said. "I want to go to the medicined den. I want to see Sparkbelly." Silverdrop sighed.

"They're amazed," she told Heartstorm, "at the

WindClan cats." she turned back to the kits. "Fine, you can go but you're not to disturb Ravenfall or Lilykit." Bumblekit and Brightkit nodded enthusiastically. They trotted out of the medicine den. Heartstorm felt a burst of love. He was glad he could help his Clan once more. He now knew what he loved most was taking care of his Clan.

Ch. 20

Heartstorm chewed the rest of the thin vole. He stood up, his stomach grumbling for more food. He trotted to the medicine den to check on Sparkbelly, Ravenfall and the kits. The kits were nestled with Ravenfall who was sleeping gently. Heartstorm spotted Sparkbelly and his stomach leapt. Sparkbelly was propped up and his eyes were opened slightly.

"Sparkbelly!" exclaimed Heartstorm, the words choking in his throat.

"Hey Heartstorm," Sparkbelly said weakly with a forced smile.

"H-how are you?" stuttered Heartstorm stupidly. "I mean, where's Frogleap? Do you need Frogleap?"

"I'm good," Sparkbelly replied. "How are things?" Heartstorm sat down in front of Sparkbelly.

"Camp was a mess, but, it's better now," Heartstorm told Sparkbelly. "You saved my life. Everybody knows you did." Sparkbelly shrugged.

"You're my Clanmate," he said simply.

"I know but...," Heartstorm trailed off, "thank you..." Sparkbelly gave a weak smile and shrugged.

"So who are the WindClan cats?" he asked, nodding towards Ravenfall and the kits.

"Ravenfall, Crowkit and Lilykit. They were hurt in the snowstorm and ended up in our territory. We took them in," explained Heartstorm. Sparkbelly nodded.

"Bumblekit and Brightkit doing alright?" he asked.

"Yeah," smiled Heartstorm.

"Silverdrop?" asked Sparkbelly. Heartstorm nodded once more. "Everybody else ok?"

"Yeah, the whole Clan is waiting for you to get better," smiled Heartstorm gently. Sparkbelly snorted.

"Ha...," he said, as if it was hard to believe. He yawned and slowly sunk back into his nest.

"You should rest," Heartstorm said, feeling Sparkbelly's tiredness.

"No it's ok," Sparkbelly said.

"No, you need to rest," Heartstorm insisted. He wished Sparkbelly luck and hope that he would get better soon then slipped out. Stripedfur passed him. She motioned at the medicine den.

"Sparkbelly doing better?" she asked. "He's a real hero, he is." Heartstorm smiled. Sparkbelly was a hero. Heartstorm would have never made it back into shelter without Sparkbelly's help.

"Yeah, he seems better. He is a hero," agreed Heartstorm. Stripedfur smiled and tipped her tail at him.

"You are too," she said and slipped off. Heartstorm didn't believe her and frowned at her words but shrugged it off. He padded towards Reedstar who was talking to Thornstar.

"Thornstar, Reedstar," said Heartstorm.

"Hey Heartstorm," Reedstar said distractedly.

"Hello Heartstorm," Thornstar said, taking a step towards Heartstorm. "Good to see you up on your feet. The kits haven't visited me for some time."

"Brightkit and Bumblekit have mostly been kept in the nursery by Silverdrop," chuckled Heartstorm. "I'll tell Brightkit you'd like to teach her new moves."

"Ah yes, I'm very much looking forward to it," Thornstar said. Reedstar huffed.

"Thornstar," he said sternly. "About the..." Thornstar nodded.

"Ah yes, why don't you talk to Heartstorm about it?" Thornstar suggested, giving Heartstorm a meaningful look. Thornstar walked off. Reedstar sighed and looked around for Blacktail.

"What is it?" asked Heartstorm curiously. Reedstar hesitated.

"Y-you're not the deputy," he said obviously.

"I know," nodded Heartstorm, feeling slightly hurt. He prepared to walk away but Reedstar shrugged.

"I can't find Blacktaill...," he said, "so you'll have to do. Being former deputy and all... There's a Gathering tonight. And I am debating whether or not to go. WE all know there is a terrible snowstorm. And what if ShadowClan suddenly think it's a good idea to attack us." Heartstorm pondered about it for a moment.

"We must go," he told Reedstar. "It'll make us look weak if we don't. Other Clans would not want to look weak either, so they would go. ShadowClan must have been hit just as badly as RiverClan. It was blowing their direction mostly. So they must not be in shape to attack. And at any hint that they might attack, we will head back for camp immediately." Reedstar frowned, deep in thought but finally nodded.

"You're right," he said finally. "Thank you. And you will go, tonight, won't you?"

"Yes," nodded Heartstorm. He didn't know why but he wanted to see ShadowClan. he wanted to look at his former Clanmates and see how much damage the snowstorm had done to them. He wanted to show them his Clan, *he,* wasn't scared.

"Thanks," muttered Reedstar. "Hey can you gather a

border patrol?" With that, Reedstar hurried off. Heartstorm knew how busy and hard it must be to be leader at this kind of time so Heartstorm gathered Eelfrost, Deerflame and Stripedfur and they headed on a border patrol. They padded past WindClan and towards ThunderClan. WindClan's moor had seemed deserted and the wind whistled loudly. As they neared ThunderClan, their fresh scent wafted to Heartstorm's nose. ThunderClan had just marked their border, their way to say, even after the storm, don't mess with us. Heartstorm marked the border of RiverClan to say the exact same thing and they padded back towards camp. Eelfrost trotted by Heartstorm's side, asking him about Ravenfall and the kits.

"They were just there, frozen," Heartstorm explained for the millionth time.

"I know but was there like ice stuck on their fur?" asked Eelfrost.

"Yeah, there was," nodded Heartstorm.

"And is Ravenfall nice? I mean, I went to visit Sparkbelly yesterday. He was sleeping. And I saw Ravenfall talking to Crowkit. I didn't say anything cos well..., they're WindClan!"

"Ravenfall is very nice."

"And the kits?"

"They're cute. "

"But they're WindClan, you know? This might be like a ruse to infiltrate our camp. I better tell Reedstar."

"Eelfrost..., they were caught in the storm. I saw them, lying there, unmoving. I would know."

"I know but they could have pretended."

"And risked the life of kits? I don't think so."

"You never know."

"Eelfrost..."

"That's my name."

"That's not what I meant-" Heartstorm sighed but couldn't help but laugh at the same time. Eelfrost grinned and twitched his tail.

"Good to have you back," he told Heartstorm. "Pretty boring without you, you know. And without Sparkbelly. I mean, I know he's dumb and all, but he was sorta funny and like.., bright and yeah..."

"I know," nodded Heartstorm, understandingly. "I saw him today though, he's getting better." Eelfrost smiled.

"Well, hope he gets better soon," Eelfrost shrugged. "So, did you hear, there's supposed to be a Gathering this evening? I don't know if we're going though."

"I know," Heartstorm told Eelfrost. "I'm going."

"We're going?" exclaimed Eelfrost. "But what if ShadowClan attacks?"

"They'll be there," Heartstorm said knowingly. "Just you wait."

Ch. 21

"Tonight, we will be going to the Gathering," announced Reedstar at the High Rock. "The cats going will be, Heartstorm, Moorpelt, Beestripe, Rainfeather, Smallear, Mudclaw, Eelfrost and I. The others will stay at camp, continuing the clean up. Tonight I will want two extra patrols after we leave for the Gathering and there will be two guards at the entrance of camp at all times. Blacktail will remain here and she will give you all the necessary information and instructions." Eelfrost trotted over to Heartstorm and grinned.

"Great, possibly the most interesting Gathering that's going to happen yet, and I'm going," he said happily then shot a look at Deerflame who padded over. "Pity you can't come." Deerflame shrugged.

"There's work to do here," she said simply. "Heartstorm, be careful alright?" Heartstorm nodded and Eelfrost made a weird face. Deerflame turned to Eelfrost. "And Heartstorm, look after Eelfrost. Make sure he doesn't do anything silly. I know he will." Eelfrost grunted and rolled his eyes but gave an affectionate lick to his mate. Deerflame smiled and swivelled around, padding away.

"This is going to be the best Gathering ever!" exclaimed Eelfrost. They headed for the camp entrance where the cats going to the Gathering were gathering. Reedstar stood at the front of the group, his eyes impassive and calm. He flicked his tail and they were off. Heartstorm ran after his Clanmates, feeling them striding beside him powerfully. He felt the cold wind brush his fur but he didn't care, he felt exhilarated. It felt good. He let his feet carry him on the path he knew so well right after Rainfeather and Reedstar. He felt Eelfrost running beside him and he felt a warmth in his body. It felt great. He couldn't explain his feeling. The moon rose in the sky, illuminating the night ground and his Clanmate's pelts. Finally, in the distance, the Four Trees stood. Heartstorm shivered at the sight for no reason. They arrived. In the clearing, ThunderClan had already gathered. The ThunderClan cats were still

big, burly and strong but there was something about the way they stood, how tired they looked and their eyes that made Heartstorm think they weren't all that strong. RiverClan stayed together. Nobody went off to talk to anybody else. Reedstar and Frogleap were the only ones who headed towards ThunderClan's leader and medicine cat. Then there was a whiff of another Clan. WindClan. Heartstorm felt suddenly scared. What if ShadowClan really didn't turn up? What if they attacked RiverClan? What if he wasn't there? He thought about Silverdrop and his kits and an uncomfortable feeling rose in his throat. He grimaced. WindClan stayed together, huddled in their own little circle. Heartstorm barely glanced at them. They were skinny and underfed and they had a scared look in their eyes. Eelfrost sat beside Heartstorm.

"Woah, the WindClan cats look as if they haven't eatne for months," Eelfrost commented. Heartstorm nodded in agreement but the feeling of unease was spreading through him quickly.

"I er..., do you think ShadowClan is going to come?" asked Heartstorm. Eelfrost shrugged, still staring at the WindClan cats.

"'Course," he said finally. "I mean, they wouldn't want to look weak."

"But what if they...," Heartstorm trailed off, not wanting to say it out loud.

"Oh," Eelfrost said, giving Heartstorm a knowing look. "They won't attack us. ShadowClan is also hurt. You know that. You told me that's what you told Reedstar."

"I know but..., what if I was wrong? What if they just hid throughout the storm and they're totally fine and they're going to attack us.., tonight?" Heartstorm gulped. The Clans whispered amongst them, casting nervous glances to each other. Nobody mingled.

"Heartstorm, even then, their camp would be ruined. They'd have to fix it, like us," Eelfrost said carefully. "The storm hit all of the Clans hard. Don't worry about ShadowClan Heartstorm."

Heartstorm couldn't believe Eelfrost though. He had a bad nagging feeling. He wanted to run to Reedstar and tell him to go back to camp. He wanted to race to camp and check on Silverdrop. He needed to make sure the kits would be alright. That they were warmly tucked in beside Silverdrop. He needed to make sure Silverdrop was alright... He knew she still had the dreams. He could see it in her eyes. She'd look at Bumblekit in a weird.., sad way. Heartstorm wanted to talk to Silverdrop about it. But.., somehow, he didn't know how to. There was nothing he could do to stop her dreams and he didn't want them to be true. He didn't want them to mean that Bumblekit was going to die. So he didn't talk to Silverdrop about it. But, as he sat there, in the clearing, thinking about it, he regretted it. What if something happened to her? And he hadn't cared about her enough to talk about her nightmares.... He shivered involuntarily. He shakily got up, ready to head back to camp. Eelfrost eyed him and the others turned to see what he was doing.

"What are you doing?" muttered Eelfrost under his breath, looking worried.

"I-I need to go back...," Heartstorm explained quickly. "I need to make sure she's alright. There's- there's something I haven't told her. And I need to tell her."

"I'm sure it can wait," Eelfrost said with a frown. "I'm worried about Deerflame too... But- but they'll be fine." Heartstorm shook his head.

"Look, I've got to go, just tell Reedstar for me, will you?" Heartstorm said.

"Heartstorm, they're fine. ShadowClan is not going to attack tonight," Eelfrost said firmly, without a trace of doubt. Heartstorm was exasperated. Even if they were not attacking, he wanted, *needed* to make sure Silverdrop and his kits were ok.

"How do you *know*?" asked Heartstorm.

"Because ShadowClan is just arriving."

Ch. 22

ShadowClan entered the clearing. Heartstorm felt their piercing glares on his fur. Their pelts and skin hung on their bones and their eyes were bloodshot. They glared around with hatred. Heartstorm's heart caught in his throat as he caught sight of his former mentor, Clawpelt and then Honeylight... She looked sadder, weaker. She didn't look his way. Clawpelt, Rabbitleap and Lionbreeze broke from the rest of their Clan and joined the leaders, deputies and medicine cats. Heartstorm waited, his eyes trained on the ShadowClan cats. He didn't know what to feel about them being there. He felt a wave of relief wash over him. They looked worst than ever. They wouldn't be able to attack RiverClan like that. The leaders leapt up on the large rock. Reedstar looked tall and proud, representing RiverClan. Heartstorm watched intently.

"Let us begin," announced ThunderClan's leader, Falconstar. His muscles rippled under his fur. "We know there has been a strong snowstorm which has affected all of us." Falconstar's gaze lingered on ShadowClan, as if taking in their weakness. "But our Clan is already recovering. We have had a few injured cats which are being well taken care off by Snowfur and a few sick cats but we are recovering, as I said before." Falconstar nodded and shifted back into the shadows.

"WindClan, was hit by the storm badly," said Fawnstar reluctantly, glaring at the other Clans, "but that does not mean we are weak." Heartstorm could see Fawnstar's bones poking out of her skin and doubted what Fawnstar said but nobody wanted to be perceived as weak. Eelfrost leaned over to Heartstorm.

"As if," he muttered. "They're skinnier than rats."

"We had a lost..," announced Fawnstar sadly, "one of our elders, Longpelt, is gone to hunt with StarClan now..." Every cat bowed their heads in respect. Heartstorm peeked up to lay his eyes on ShadowClan. Their heads were held high, their eyes shining with indifference. Heartstorm felt himself bristle. He wanted to growl but

he kept it in.

"We mourn your lost," said Reedstar, dipping his head and stepping into the moonlight. "There are a few things I need to address tonight. Firstly, Thornstar has retired." There were murmurs and conversations broke out. Heartstorm glared at the cats who had interrupted Reedstar. "I am RiverClan's new leader. Our new deputy is Blacktail." Blacktail stepped forward.

"Blacktail," acknowledged Falconstar.

"All is well in WindClan. We are recovering well from the storm," Reedstar finished. It was Clawpelt's turn.

"As you might have noticed," Clawpelt said in a husky voice. "There have been changes in ShadowClan. *Cinderstar* is not here tonight. I am the new leader of ShadowClan. Clawstar." Howls and cheers rose from ShadowClan. Heartstorm felt a cold shiver run through his body. Eelfrost frowned, his tail twitching. RiverClan shuffled closer together. The mad looks in the ShadowClan's eyes made Heartstorm's fur rise.

"I have appointed Rabbitleap as my new deputy," continued Clawstar fiercely. Heartstorm didn't like the sound of Clawstar. It had a bad ring to it. Reedstar stood, watching, without any emotion and Heartstorm was glad of it.

"You might wonder what happened to Cinderstar...," Clawstar growled. RiverClan cast each others looks. They all new. The other Clans though, were looking curious and eager to know. "She was banished. She was weak. She was soft hearted." Clawstar's gaze landed on Heartstorm and he barred his teeth. Falconstar narrowed his eyes at Clawstar, not looking very happy. Fawnstar didn't betray her feelings, looking passive.

"She was a traitor," spat Clawstar. "And without her, ShadowClan is unstoppable." Clawstar puffed out his chest and looked proudly at his Clan. Cheers and yowls broke out from ShadowClan. RiverClan, ThunderClan and WindClan watched. Heartstorm saw how skinny the ShadowClan cats were but still, there was an air of menace around them. Clawstar leapt down and

joined his Clan. They parted to make way for him, dipping their heads in respect. Rabbitleap and Lionbreeze were on his tail. Lionbreeze glanced around nervously at the other Clans but then quickly caught up with Rabbitleap. With that, ShadowClan swept out of the clearing. Fawnstar twitched her tail then bounded off the rock. She joined her Clan. They mingled together for a while then WindClan slipped away. RiverClan and ThunderClan remained. Heartstorm worried ShadowClan might go and attack RiverClan now but something told him it wasn't going to happen. It'd be unlikely. So he stayed put, waiting for his leader to finish conversation and to go. Falconstar turned to his Clan and beckoned them forward. Reedstar turned to RiverClan and motioned for them to come as well.

"We have decided," Falconstar announced, looking at both RiverClan and ThunderClan. "That ShadowClan has done enough of taunting and threatening. We will stand against them." There were a few confused looks. Reedstar and Falconstar didn't seem worried, but more confident. Heartstorm knew that together, they were stronger. He was glad they wouldn't be fighting ShadowClan alone.

"If ShadowClan attacks either of us, we will join together and fight them," continued Reedstar, scanning every cat slowly. Eelfrost frowned. ThunderClan shrugged. They knew it was more likely ShadowClan attacked them and were glad for extra help. But RiverClan knew ShadowClan was a looming threat to them as well. ShadowClan wanted and would get revenge.

"It is time to go," Falconstar said, flicking his tail. "Come on." With that, ThunderClan bounded away. Reedstar sighed and stared at his Clan.

"We're going to need all the help we can get against ShadowClan. They are ruthless," he said then flicked his tail. Heartstorm and the rest of RiverClan followed Reedstar back towards their territory.

Heartstorm slipped into the nursery. Acornheart was sleeping gently, Daisykit and Heatherkit were curled up next to her. Silverdrop was at the end of the nursery, her eyes open, day dreaming. Heartstorm padded to her side and gave her a warm lick

on the cheek. Bumblekit and Brightkit were nestled at her stomach, sleeping peacefully.

"How was it?" whispered Silverdrop, her eyes glistening.

"ShadowClan is.. confident," Heartstorm told her. "We are joining ThunderClan. In an alliance." Silverdrop looked thoughtful then shrugged.

"We will need all the help we can get," she said simply then looked at the kits. "They're so peaceful."

"I know," sighed Heartstorm. He hoped that peace and innocence would never be taken away from them. He'd protect them.

"You look worried," noticed Silverdrop, frowning in concern.

"I'm ok."

"You're worried. I know you."

"Well, ShadowClan is a threat. "

"It's not that. What's bothering you?"

"I just er... look, it's nothing. Go back to sleep. You need rest. I'll come see you tomorrow morning right?"

"Heartstorm. What is it?"

"Silverdrop, it's nothing. Good night."

"Don't lie."

"I'm not ly-"

"Heartstorm."

"It's just... you're still having those dreams aren't you? You were having one before I came in... I saw it. In your eyes."

"They're every night. You know that. Don't worry about it."

"But there's got to be something we can do. I can do."

"No, there isn't."

"I'm not going to stand by and let you have these nightmares. Not anymore. And... and what if they're real. What id the cat Blizzardkit kills is- is Bumblekit...?"

"It's not. He's ok. He's going to be ok."

"I don't want you to not be able to sleep at night. I can't imagine the feeling."

"I'm used to it."

"But you shouldn't be."

"Heartstorm. You promised. You promised you wouldn't tell anybody."

"Sometimes... promises are broken."

"You can't break your promise. I trusted you. I trust you. You can't break your promise."

"Silverdrop... please. It's what's best for both of-"

"What's best? How is it better? Frogleap will tell me I can't be a warrior anymore. He'll make me a medicine cat. Or he'll put me in the elders den. And- and then... I don't know what he'll try to do...He'd make them stop.... he'd make the dreams stop."

"Silverdrop... what are you really scared off?" Heartstorm crouched down beside his mate. He could feel Silverdrop trembling. He cuddled up to her, warming her up. He wished he could take all her pain away.

"I don't want Frogleap to make the dreams go," whispered Silverdrop, looking into Heartstorm's eyes. Heartstorm

frowned, not understanding.

"But isn't-" Heartstorm started. Silverdrop brushed her tail across his mouth.

"What if my mother tries to talk to me? What if something significant happens in one of my dreams? Something which could warn us. Help us. Save the kits. And what if I can't have the dreams? And I miss it?" Silverdrop countered.

"You won't- It won't-" Heartstorm stuttered.

"Heartstorm, listen to me. You promised you wouldn't tell anybody. One day, these dreams, nightmares, visions, whatever you call them, one day they will help us. And... and I want to be able to see it when that day comes," Silverdrop said firmly. It was the end of the conversation. Heartstorm knew it. He closed his eyes and nodded slowly. He leaned his head on Silverdrop's shoulder and felt her soft fur tickle his nose. He breathed in her sweet scent. Silverdrop nuzzled him lovingly.

"I love you," whispered Heartstorm.

"I love you more."

Ch. 23

"We're going to play with Crowkit and Lilykit," squealed Brightkit.

"We want to come too!" cried Daisykit.

"But you don't know them," pointed out Brightkit.

"So?" snapped Daisykit. "You don't know them either."

"We've talked to them," Brightkit said, sticking her tongue out.

"Don't argue," warned Cloudbreeze amused.

"But Daisykit and Heatherkit don't know the WindClan kits, they might not like them," Brightkit pouted.

"Brightkit," Heartstorm said. "You have to be nice. Why don't you introduce them to Crowkit and Lilykit then?" Brightkit shrugged.

"Ok," she said. Together, the four kits bounded out of the nursery and towards the medicine den. Silverdrop purred and got up followed by Acornheart.

"We're going for a walk," meowed Silverdrop. "We need to stretch out legs."

"You toms better take care of the kits. I don't want to find them attacking ShadowClan when we get back," said Acornheart. Cloudbreeze licked Acornheart on the ear, chuckling.

"We'll be fine," he assured her. Heartstorm smiled at Silverdrop. She tipped her tail at him and slipped out of the nursery.

"When do you reckon the WindClan cats will leave?"

asked Cloudbreeze.

"When they're better," Heartstorm said.

"They should be good to be going soon," Cloudbreeze said.

"Yeah...," shrugged Heartstorm. Part of him didn't want to see them go. They were sort of part of the Clan. Well, not of RiverClan, but part of life at RiverClan.

"They seem healthy enough to go back to their Clan," said Cloudbreeze. "They don't need us to nurse them back totally to health."

"Maybe Lilykit is too weak to make the journey," suggested Heartstorm.

"Of course not," he said. "Somebody can carry her. Ravenfall can carry her. I certainly do agree that Ravenfall and the kits are being very friendly but they are taking our food. We need that food. For ourselves. For the Clan. And Ravenfall and the kits, no matter how friendly, are not our Clan." Heartstorm had to admit Cloudbreeze was right.

"I'm sure Frogleap knows what's right," Hearststorm shrugged.

"I sure hope he does," huffed Cloudbreeze. Heartstorm and Cloudbreeze padded out of the nursery. The air was cool and a gentle breeze blew. Light snow covered the ground. It shimmered in the sunlight. Heartstorm let the sun warm his neck for a while before staring towards the fresh-kill pile. A sorry looking sparrow and a skinny mouse were lying in the hole. He sighed. His stomach grumbled angrily but he knew he couldn't eat. Not when there was the whole Clan hungry. He'd already gone hunting the morning. They had been forced to double the amount of hunting patrols which meant cats went out hunting at least twice a day. Heartstorm yawned. He hadn't had a good night's sleep in days. He kept thinking back to the Gathering. He was certainly glad they had the fearsome ThunderClan by their side but he still didn't think that

would stop ShadowClan. ShadowClan had a plan. He didn't even know why they hated him so. The more he thought about it, the more worked up he got. ShadowClan had, in the end, chased him out. They couldn't be regretting their decision. They hated him so much. They loathed him. He sighed. Just then, Reedstar trotted to Heartstorm.

"Hey," he said. "Where is Silverdrop?"

"Out for a walk," Heartstorm told Reedstar.

"I need to talk to you about the kits," said Reedstar. "About their mentors. Blacktail and I think we have the perfect cats to mentor your kits. I thought to consult you first maybe. Just so you know our choices." Heartstorm nodded, he felt excitement bubbling in his stomach.

"Both your kits want to become warriors right?" Reedstar questioned. Heartstorm nodded. He had seen Brightkit training with Thornstar for fun. She was natural. Bumblekit was just as lively and excited.

"Blacktail and I were thinking Hawkflight for Brighkit perhaps," Reedstar said. Heartstorm's eyes lit up. He trusted Hawkflight to mentor his kits. Afterall, he had mentored Hawkflight. He nodded vigorously.

"I know Hawkflight can do it," Heartstorm said.

"Yes, he had you and Wolfstep as mentors, I know he is a great warrior and would be a great mentor," nodded Reedstar thoughtfully. "And for Bumblekit, we have Mudclaw or Smoketail." Heartstorm knew they were both formidable warriors. Mudclaw was strong and determined and Smoketail was good natured, wise and intelligent. He could trust both of them to mentor Bumblekit as well. But, he realised, he trusted all his Clanmates. He trusted them all to mentor his kits.

"Yeah great, they'd both be great," Heartstorm nodded. Reedstar smiled.

"Great then. In two moons, your kits will be apprentices," Reedstar said and padded off. Heartstorm smiled. Apprentices... He felt pride bubbling inside him. He heard squeals and spotted Brightkit, Crowkit, Heatherkit, Daisykit, Bumblekit and Lilykit running through the clearing. Cats turned around to watch them, their eyes sparkling in amusement. Heartstorm chuckled. They barged towards him and stumbled into the nursery.

"I was first!" Heartstorm heard Brightkit announced from inside. He poked his head into the nursery where Bumblekit and Lilykit were sprawled on the soft sand.

"NO I was," Crowkit said.

"I could have beaten both of you!" replied Heatherkit.

"No you couldn't," Brightkit said indignantly. Heatherkit stuck out her tongue. Heartstorm smiled. Bumblekit spotted him and trotted towards him.

"I don't like racing with them," He huffed. "Brightkit is so competitive."

"That'll make her a good warrior. One to reckon with," smiled Heartstorm. Bumblekit walked alongside him. They headed for the small stream.

"What is it like? RiverClan," asked Bumblekit. Heartstorm imagined RiverClan stretching out. It's big river flowing quickly, it's large trees, the flowers...

"It's beautiful," Heartstorm said. "Perhaps the most beautiful of all the Clans."

"Is it true you were ShadowClan?" asked Bumblekit, his eyes wide.

"I er..., yes," Heartstorm said with a small frown. He wondered how his kit knew. Nobody ever talked about it.

"Frogleap told me," explained Bumblekit. "But he said that it wasn't something bad, where you had come from. What

mattered was what you did and you chose to stay with RiverClan and be loyal to RiverClan." Heartstorm smiled.

"Yes, Frogleap is right," he nodded. He couldn't imagine an old grumpy cat like Frogleap protecting him.

"How was it in ShadowClan?" asked Bumblekit. Heartstorm thought for a while. They reached the stream.

"It was... it was different. They weren't mean... they were my Clan. They were just like this I guess... but ShadowClan wasn't-isn't my home," Heartstorm said. "Never has and never will be." Bumblekit nodded thoughtfully.

"Is that why you left ShadowClan?" asked Bumblekit. Heartstorm found memories fresh in his mind of his time in ShadowClan. He hadn't realised they had been there for a long time. He hadn't talked about his past to anybody for a long time. He realised of course, one day, he had to talk about it to his kits. He only realised this now. But somehow, it didn't scare him.

"No," admitted Heartstorm. "they threw me out."

"Why?" asked Bumblekit. Heartstorm thought back about falling in love with Ivyvine. He thought about their meetings together. About Lionbreeze finding out. He remembered his punishment. It had only been temporary. Until the rogues attacked. Then they had banished him. Forever.

"I fell in love," Heartstorm said half truthfully. It had started because of that. "I fell in love with the wrong cat."

"Wrong cat? How come?" asked Bumblekit, confused.

"I fell in love with a WindClan cat," Heartstorm said. There were no secrets. He didn't have to keep his past from his kits. His Clan knew about it already. And still, they accepted him. He was part of them.

"You did?" gasped Bumblekit. Even he knew it wasn't supposed to happen. "So they exiled you for that?"

"Yeah."

"That's mean."

"It's not.. well it is. But if I had wanted to stay in ShadowClan, I wouldn't have fallen in love with another Clan cat. It doesn't work that way. I cannot be part of one Clan and love another."

"But you met Silverdrop. And you *love* her."

"Of course I do. I will never stop loving her."

"It's good that you left ShadowClan."

"I think so too."

"If you hadn't, Brightkit, Sagekit and I wouldn't have been born." Heartstorm's heart ached at the mention of Sagekit. He closed his eyes and imagined his kit, running next to Brightheart up in StarClan. He imagined Sagekit close to him, licking his fur.

"Yes, I'm so glad you three were born..," Heartstorm said. Tears brimmed in his eyes. Sagekit.

"I miss Sagekit," Bumblekit said. "But you said he's in StarClan. You saw him right?"

"I did."

"And he's happy."

"He is."

"The next time you visit StarClan, will you say hi to Sagekit for me?"

"Of course," choked Heartstorm. Bumblekit smiled and snuggled next to Heartstorm who had stopped walking and lay on the ground, watching the water trickle by.

Ch. 24

Heartstorm slipped into the medicine den to pay visit to Sparkbelly, Ravenfall and the kits. Sparkbelly was awake. His wounds had almost fully healed and he was more energetic now.

"Hey Sparkbelly," smiled Heartstorm. Sparkbelly flashed him a grin.

"Hey Heartstorm," he replied. "How's life without me?"

"Pretty boring," Heartstorm said truthfully. Sparkbelly chuckled.

"Ah well, you're going to have to be bored for a few more days," Sparkbelly teased. Heartstorm's eyes lit up.

"You'll be back out in a few days?" he asked. Sparkbelly shrugged.

"I'll be allowed out. And I'm hoping you're going to throw me a party," Sparkbelly said seriously.

"I was just planning one," grinned Heartstorm.

"So how are the kits?" asked Sparkbelly.

"Great," smiled Hearstorm. He nodded to Crowkit and Lilykit who were sleeping. "They've got new playmates."

"Yeah, they do get along well," put in Ravenfall.

"Can't wait to have you back in camp," Heartstorm told Sparkbelly. Frogleap padded into the medicine den.

"The medicined den is part of camp, you know," he muttered. Just then Eelfrost entered.

"Hey Hearty," he joked. Heartstorm rolled his eyes. "Hey Sparky!" Sparkbelly gave Heartstorm a look but smiled.

"Hey *Eely*," he replied. Eelfrost's eyes went wide.

"THat is not my name!" he exclaimed. "Hope you get better! Can't wait to have you back in camp. You can go on patrols for me. I'm so tired."

"Me too," nodded Heartstorm.

"I've had way too much rest," exclaimed Sparkbelly.

"Oh I could do with some of that," Eelfrost said. "I'd happily change."

"Same here," Sparkbelly said.

"Eelfrost!" a voice called. It was Deerflame.

"Oh! It's Deerflame. I've got a hunting patrol. See you later Sparky, get better," Eelfrost said then brushed past Heartstorm. "And Heartstorm you better not ditch me on that dusk patrol to WindClan!" Heartstorm laughed.

"When have I ever ditched you?" he exclaimed.

"You fell asleep the day before yesterday! And you missed it! had to tolerate Moorpelt complaining for hours!" Eelfrost replied firmly.

"Eelfrost!" came Deerflame's voice, sharper this time.

"get out of here Eelfrost," Frogleap warned. "Before Deerflame storms in." Eelfrost quickly trotted out. Frogleap was at his tail.

"Heartstorm, I need to tell you something," said Ravenfall.

"Yeah?" asked Heartstorm. "Is everything alright?"

"Frogleap said we're good to go tomorrow," Ravenfall said sadly.

"Oh no!" exclaimed Heartstorm. "I mean that's great. I'm happy you're better." Ravenfall smiled sadly.

"It was so nice of you to take us in. And I guess the kits and I have become quite attached as well... I mean, really, thank you," Ravenfall said.

"Yeah, I'm going to miss the kits," sighed Sparkbelly. "They keep me company with good jokes."

"I haven't told the kits yet," Ravenfall said. "They're attached to Brightkit and Bumblekit. Heatherkit and Daisykit as well. In WindClan they're the only kits so they don't really get that privilege. I don't know how to break it to them." Heartstorm didn't know why he felt so sad to know Ravenfall and the kits would be leaving. He knew he shouldn't be attached. They were of different Clans. Sometimes, Heartstorm wished there weren't different Clans. He wished they were just one big Clan.

"Break to us what?" yawned Crowkit, blinking. Lilykit shifted in her sleep.

"Ah, nothing," Ravenfall soothed. "Go back to sleep."

"What is it?" asked Crowkit, alarmed.

"I'll tell you when Lilykit's awake," Ravenfall said.

"Lilykit! Wake up! Ravenfall wants to tell us something!" Crowkit said, nudging his sister. Bleary eyed, Lilykit woke up.

"DOn't wake her up!" grunted Ravenfall with a sigh. Heartstorm smiled sympathetically.

"What is it?" asked Crowkit.

"Well, er, tomorrow, we will be leaving," Ravenfall said. Lilykit's eyes went wide. Crowkit gaped.

"Why?" asked Lilykit.

"Where? asked Crowkit.

"Well back to WindClan of course," Ravenfall said.

"but how about Brightkit and Bumblekit?" asked Crowkit. "And Heaterkit and Daisykit."

"Well, you'll still know them," Ravenfall said. He was careful not to say "you can still be their friend" as he knew that was not true.

"But we don't want to leave," groaned Lilykit. Ravenfall looked hurt. The kits hadn't had too much time to be attached to WindClan and it was easier for them to get attached to RiverClan but he knew he was WindClan and that was where his loyalties lay.

"Don't you miss Cloverwish? You'll be able to see her again," Ravenfall said. "I miss her.."

"Yeah! we do!" exclaimed Crowkit. "But can't she come and live here?"

"Yeah! She can come!" piped in Lilykit. Heartstorm's heart broke and Sparkbelly looked down sadly.

"Don't you want to see Galestrike and Ivyvine and Firecry?" Ravenfall asked.

"No," said Crowkit honestly. "We like Eelfrost and Deerflame and Sparkbelly and Heartstorm and Silverdrop and Cloudbreeze and Frogleap..."

"And Bumblekit and Brightkit and Heatherkit and Daisykit," added Lilykit.

"We can't stay here," sighed Ravenfall. "We are WindClan."

"But we want to be RiverClan," groaned Crowkit.

Ravenfall's brow deepened. This was something he did not want to hear.

"You are both loyal to WindClan. You were born there. WindClan is your Clan. RiverClan has only brought us here for a while. We are not here to stay," he said sharply.

"B-b," protested Crowkit.

"No Crowkit. Do you want to see Cloverwish?" Ravenfall said.

"Yeah but-" Crowkit started.

"No buts," growled Ravenfall. "WindClan is your Clan. Not RiverClan." The words were harsh and Heartstorm should have felt hurt but he knew they were the truth. He would have said the same to his own kits. Sparkbelly turned away. The kits huddled closer to each other, lowering their eyes. Heartstorm let out a slow breath. Ravenfall stared coldly at Heartstorm but it turned to sadness. He looked down at his kits sadly, realising that being in RiverClan made them happier than being in WindClan.

"Get better soon Sparkbelly," Heartstorm said. He nodded respectfully to Ravenfall. Then turned to the kits, his eyes sad, "Goodbye Crowkit, Lilykit."

"Bye Heartstorm!" they chorused.

Ch. 25

Heartstorm opened his eyes and stared into green eyes. He sprung back in surprise.

"Hey Heartstorm," smiled Sparkbelly.

"You're out!" exclaimed Heartstorm.

"Frogleap said first thing this morning," nodded Sparkbelly. Cats stirred around them. Moorpelt spotted Sparkbelly and leapt to his feet.

"Sparkbelly! You're better!" he cried. "Good to have you back." Sparkbelly beamed.

"Sparkbelly," cats were saying as they saw him. Soon, Sparkbelly was swarmed with good wishers and everybody was telling him he was a hero. Heartstorm smiled. Deerflame joined him.

"Hey," she smiled.

"hey," he answered.

"Ravenfall and the kits are leaving today," Deerflame said. Heartstorm sighed.

"Yeah, I know," he said.

"Let's go see them," she suggested. He nodded. They padded towards the medicine den. Heartstorm glanced towards the nursery, imagining his kits and Silverdrop sleeping peacefully. They entered the medicine den. Ravenfall was talking to Frogleap and Reedstar. Crowkit and Lilykit were huddled in a corner, looking resentfully at Ravenfall.

"Good morning Deerflame and Heartstorm," smiled Reedstar, spotting them. Ravenfall nodded to them.

"Ravenfall and the kits are ready to go," informed Frogleap.

"We will be sending a few warriors with them," Reedstar nodded. Ravenfall scoffed, as if he needed company to go back to his Clan.

"You are in our Clan territory," Reedstar said narrowing his eyes.

"I know," Ravenfall said coldly then dipped his head. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Hey kits," smiled Deerflame.

"Hi Deerflame," they whispered back softly.

"How are you both doing?" asked Heartstorm. "Aren't you happy to be going home?"

"This is our home," Crowkit said. Lilykit nodded her head enthusiastically.

"Lilykit, Crowkit!" snapped Ravenfall.

"We will send Deerflame and Heartstorm with you," said Reedstar.

"We want to see Sparkbelly!" cried Crowkit. Ravenfall let out a small growl.

"Of course," nodded Reedstar, "Sparkbelly can come too." The kits smiled.

"We will leave at once then," Ravenfall decided.

"If our warriors are ready," put in Reedstar.

"We can go now," nodded Heartstorm.

"I'll get Sparkbelly," Deerflame said. Frogleap turned back to his herbs.

"Thank you Frogleap," Ravenfall said slowly. "And

Reedstar. For your hospitality. We appreciate it." Reedstar nodded and padded out of the den followed swiftly by Frogleap. Heartstorm turned silently to Ravenfall.

"So you were in love with Ivyvine?" asked Ravenfall. Heartstorm hesitated.

"I was," he nodded.

"She's with Firecry now," Ravenfall told him.

"And I'm with Silverdrop," Heartstorm said.

"Thank you for being kind to us," Ravenfall said, looking down. "But we are of different Clans. We cannot be friends. Just acquaintances." Heartstorm nodded. Deerflame and Sparkbelly burst into the medicine den. The kits squealed when they saw Sparkbelly.

"Hi Sparkbelly!" they cried. Sparkbelly smiled and trotted over to them, giving each of them a lick on the forehead. Ravenfall watched without any emotion.

"Let's go," Deerflame said, flicking her tail. They slipped out of the medicine den. A few warriors muttered their goodbyes to Ravenfall and beamed brightly at the kits. They reached the camp entrance.

"Can we say goodbye to Bumblekit and Brightkit and Heatherkit and Daisykit?" asked Lilykit, wide eyed. Crowkit nodded vigourously.

"They'll be sleeping," replied Ravenfall. He didn't like how attached his kits were to RiverClan.

"They won't mind. I'm sure they'd love to see you," Heartstorm assured the kits. He ran towards the nursery and slipped in. Silverdrop looked up.

"Are they leaving?" she asked. Heartstorm nodded. Silverdrop nudged their kits awake.

"Bumblekit, Brightkit," she whispered. "Crowkit and Lilykit are leaving. Don't you want to say goodbye?" Brightkit sprung to her feet.

"Really?" she exclaimed. She ran out of the nursery followed by Bumblekit. Acornheart nodded to Heatherkit and Daisykit to say they were allowed to go as well. Heartstorm and Silverdrop followed them. They watched as Crowkit and Lilykit wrestled a bit with their kits until Ravenfall pulled them away.

"Say goodbye," he said firmly.

"bye," chorused Crowkit and Lilykit. "See you again." Ravenfall raised his eyebrows.

"bye," cried the other kits. Heartstorm smiled. Then Deerflame led them out of camp towards WindClan. The kits pointed out scenery and Eelfrost, Sparkbelly and Heartstorm made jokes but then they lapsed into silence. A strong wind blew and the air was cold. The ground was hard and frozen. No birds sung. The sky was a cloudy grey. Heartstorm shivered.

"Did they mention us, at the Gathering?" asked Ravenfall. Heartstorm recalled the Gathering and realised WindClan hadn't mentioned their missing warrior and kits.

"Well..., no," Heartstorm replied. Ravenfall frowned. "I'm sure it's because they didn't want to sound... weak." Ravenfall barred his teeth.

"Of course," he muttered. He seemed slightly more bitter towards his own Clan.

"Also," added Eelfrost sadly, as if something was just dawning on him. "Longpelt passed away." Ravenfall's eyes dimmed. The kits looked quizzically up at Eelfrost. Heartstorm looked away.

"What happened to Longpelt?" repeated Crowkit.

"He's with StarClan," replied Ravenfall then turned back to Heartstorm and Eelfrost. Deerflame padded beside the kits, looking at them thoughtfully. "Did they not even mention us?"

"No..., sorry," Heartstorm said.

"It's ok," Ravenfall said although it wasn't. "They probably knew we were fine." Eelfrost and Heartstorm nodded to make Ravenfall feel better. They reached the edge of the forest. Ravenfall sniffed and smelt his own Clan. Heartstorm saw the moor stretch wide in front of them. The grasses swayed in the wind. Suddenly, there was movement and a WindClan patrol appeared on the other side of the river. A dark orange-brown cat was at the front. His name was Foxstep.

"RiverClan," he snarled. The other cats behind him were bony and skinny, their eyes were tired and they looked very worn out. Sparkbelly let the kits inch closer to him. Then the WindClan cat's eyes landed on Ravenfall and the kits.

"Ravenfall? Crowkit? Lilykit?" cried Foxstep.

"Ravenfall! The kits!" exclaimed another cat. A few cats slashed their tails and snarled.

"What have they done?" growled a cat.

"Let them go!" shouted another.

"Have they hurt you?" asked Foxstep. Ravenfall stepped forward.

"They did not," he assured them. Heartstorm, Sparkbelly, Eelfrost and Deerflame stood by his side, regarding the WindClan cats coldly. Crowkit and Lilykit seemed scared. Scared of their own Clan.

"H-how?" burst out one cat.

"RiverClan helped us," Ravenfall said. "Thank you for your concern Webcall."

"Let them back," growled Foxstep.

"We were just escorting him back to your territory," replied Heartstorm sharply.

"hey kits," said a soft voice. It was Sunpelt. "How are you doing?"

"Good..," replied Crowkit shyly.

"Cloverwish has missed you all very much," Sunpelt assured them.

"Get back to our side," Foxstep said, his eyes flashing.

"I just need to ask you something fist," Ravenfall said. Foxstep lifted his eyebrow.

"What?" he demanded.

"Why didn't you mention us at the Gathering?" asked Ravenfall. Foxstep frowned.

"Do not ask things in front of RiverClan. Let's go. Cloverwish and Fawnstar and the deputy and Addertail and *everybody* will want to know what happened," Foxstep said, bristling.

"No," said Ravenfall firmly. "Why didn't you mention us at the Gathering?"

"This is not something RiverClan needs to hear," Foxstep said firmly.

"Come on Ravenfall," Sunpelt put in gently.

"Tell me, Foxstep. I'm not moving until you tell me," Ravenfall said firmly.

"We didn't know if you were dead or not!" snapped Foxstep. "Now get back to your Clan. Unless you are RiverClan now." Foxstep growled. Ravenfall's eyes darkened.

"I am not," he assured them coldly.

"Then get back to your Clan," Foxstep said with narrowed eyes. Webcall glanced at the kits worriedly. Ravenfall

tilted his head at Heartstorm.

"Meet me here at sundown tomorrow," he whispered then flicked his tail at his kits. He slipped into the tunnel and reappeared on the other side. There was a brief welcome and exchange of licks then the WindClan cats turned back to RiverClan.

"Thank you for helping them," Sunpelt said.

"Yes," Agreed Webcall. "Thank you for taking them in." Foxstep didn't say anything. HE grabbed Crowkit by the scruff and turned tail. He disappeared in the tall grasses. Ravenfall dipped his head to them. Then he took Lilykitand the WindClan patrol was gone.

"Bye Heartstorm! Sparkbelly! Deerflame! Eelfrost!" The kits meowed.

"Bye," whispered back Heartstorm.

"not very friendly are they?" muttered Eelfrost. "Even with their own Clanmates."

"They're in hard times," shrugged Deerflame. "Hope the kits are alright. I was quite attached to them."

"Me too. And especially Bumblekit and Brightkit," nodded Heartstorm. Sparkbelly sighed.

"they were good company in the medicine den with me," he muttered. They turned back towards the forest.

"well, they are gone now, back to their own Clan," sighed Heartstorm. "They will live their own lives for their Clan. And we're going to get on fine without them." The words were harsh but true. Heartstorm felt an aching feeling to run after the kits and bring them back. To see them smile again. But he knew it was not going to happen. The kits were back with their Clan. They were not going to see each other again. Unless it was at a Gathering or a... battle. Heartstorm recalled Ravenfall's words, "meet me here at sundown tomorrow." What did Ravenfall need? Why? Heartstorm's mind was whirling with different possibilities. But finally, they reached camp

and he was snatched away from his pondering as his kits ran up to him. They asked him but Crowkit and Lilykit. And Ravenfall. Wondering when they were coming back. Heartstorm sat them down sadly. And he didn't lie to them because it wouldn't do them any good. So he told them the truth.

"They're not coming back."

Ch. 26

Heartstorm shivered in the cold. The sky was grey and the air felt wet. Heartstorm could feel the rain coming. They had just finished their hunting patrol. Heartstorm nudged Rosebriar.

"Can you bring my prey back for me, please?" he asked. "I'll be back later." Rosebriar nodded and shrugged. She took Heartstorm's small mouse. Heartstorm watched as his patrol trotted away. He watched them until they disappeared from view. Then he turned and jogged towards the WindClan border. He didn't know if Ravenfall was going to be there. But he had to be sure. He had to make sure they were ok. He hoped Ravenfall would bring the kits. But that was not very probable. Kits weren't allowed out of Clan afterall. Heartstorm smelt WindClan. He could see the sky getting darker although the sun was nowhere to be seen. Heartstorm spotted the tunnel and heard some rustling. He padded cautiously towards the tunnel. He jumped back as he saw a dark shape of a cat in the tunnel. It was Ravenfall. He sighed in relief.

"Heartstorm!" gasped Ravenfall. "You came! Thank you."

"No problem...," Heartstorm said worriedly. "Are you ok? What happened?"

"No I'm ok. The kits are alright. Reunited with Cloverwish," Ravenfall said. "They just... they miss RiverClan."

"Yeah, we miss them too. But they're home now," smiled Heartstorm. He wondered if he was doing something wrong. He hoped he wasn't. But he knew his Clanmates probably shouldn't see him. It reminded him of meeting up with Ivyvine. He shuddered at the thought of seeing his Clan's disappointed and betrayed faces.

"What do you need to tell me? Is there something you need to tell me?" Heartstorm asked. He ached to go back to his warm nest or to the nursery to see his kits. It started to drizzle. Light drops of rain fell onto Heartstorm's fur.

"They really miss RiverClan. They- they think it's *their* Clan," Ravenfall said, looking down. "They think they're going to WindClan to visit...." Heartstorm frowned.

"So they think they're coming back? To RiverClan?" Heartstorm clarified. Ravenfall nodded.

"I told them they are not," Ravenfall said. "They're really sad. Like really really sad. I knew this was going to happen. They weren't too attached with WindClan. I just- Heartstorm, I know this is a lot to ask." The wind picked up. It blew strongly.

"What is it Ravenfall?" Heartstorm asked gently.

"I can't- I can't believe I'm saying this..," Ravenfall sighed. "I'm doing it for them. I love them. I don't want them to be sad. I just-" Heartstorm's frown deepened .

"What happened?" Heartstorm urged, glancing around.

"Can you ask if they can join RiverClan?" blurted Ravenfall. His eyes were wide. He was shivering slightly. His tail twitched. He looked sad, betrayed. But he loved his kits and he would do what it took for them to be happy. Heartstorm stared, shocked at Ravenfall.

"I'm sorry..., what?" He said.

"Please," begged Ravenfall. "Just ask. I don't know if it's possible. I don't know... but they're so unhappy. They miss you." Heartstorm gulped. He didn't know why it made him sad. Maybe because it was so unlikely.

"That's- that's not possible," Heartstorm apologised. "We can't take in anybody."

"They took you in. I thought you would understand," Ravenfall pressed.

"Yes but- but they were low on cats and- and I had nowhere else to go," Heartstorm said.

"Please," repeated Ravenfall sadly. Heartstorm sighed.

"Right. Ok," he said. "I don't promise anything. But I don't understand, aren't your Clanmates nice to the kits?"

"They don't really interact with the kits. It was fine alright, they were fine with it. But then they experienced RiverClan. And how warriors interacted with the kits. It was easy for them to get attached," Ravenfall explained. "I know it's a lot to ask. I don't even know if Cloverwish would agree."

"Yeah, and how about the both of you?" asked Heartstorm. He had prepared himself for so many thing but he had never thought this would be Ravenfall's request.

"We- I'll be ok when I know they're ok," Ravenfall said.

"You know you won't be able to change Clan. You're- you're already a WindClan *warrior*," Heartstorm pointed out.

"I know," Ravenfall nodded.

"And Cloverwish? Does she approve?" asked Heartstorm. Ravenfall sighed and shook his head.

"No, she's mad. Mad that I didn't make them more distant to RiverClan. She hates it when they talk about RiverClan so much," Ravenfall said.

"But they'll be living without both of you, how is that better?" Heartstorm questioned.

"They'll have you. And the whole Clan. See, that's the thing, in RiverClan, the whole Clan raises the kits. It's not the same in RiverClan. It's only the parents. Then the mentor," RiverClan explained. Heartstorm nodded.

"I'll- I'll do what I can but it won't be easy. I mean, your Clan, would they even agree?" Heartstorm asked seriously.

"I don't know.. but it's not their choice," Ravenfall said stubbornly.

"Yes but it is also Cloverwish's choice," Heartstorm said.

"She wants what's best for them," Ravenfall said unsurely.

"Would she give them up? She doesn't know anything about us."

"Look, Heartstorm, please?"

"I already told you I would. And I will."

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

"Don't get your hopes up."

"I... I won't..."

"Good. I must go now."

"Goodbye Heartstorm."

"Tell the kits hello for me."

"I will. Thank you, again." Heartstorm turned around and slipped out of the tunnel. He stared passed the river and saw Ravenfall's dark shape slithering through the tall grasses. The rain had picked up. It pelted down. Heartstorm's fur was soaked and hung limply down, weighing him down. The river raged, the current strong. Heartstorm swivelled around and headed back for RiverClan.

Ch. 27

Heartstorm approached Reedstar.

"Yeah?" asked Reedstar, flicking his tail.

"I need to talk to you about something... peculiar," Heartstorm said carefully. Reedstar frowned but shrugged.

"Sure, what is it?" asked Reedstar.

"It's um... about Ravenfall," Heartstorm started. Reedstar's brow furrowed deeper.

"What about him? They're gone," Reedstar said, narrowing his eyes. He flicked his tail to the spot beside him, gesturing for Heartstorm to sit down.

"Yeah well um, he just talked to me," Heartstorm said. "At the border. He asked-"

"When?" asked Reedstar.

"Just now," Heartstorm replied.

"What did he say?"

"He asked if the kits... if the kits..."

"Yes?"

"If the kits could join RiverClan..." Heartstorm felt uneasy as the silence crawled by. Nerves nibbled his stomach. He cringed. Reedstar was speechless.

"Crowkit and Lilykit? Ravenfall wants them to join RiverClan?" Reedstar repeated. "Heartstorm, what?"

"He said the kits are attached to RiverClan. That they

want to be RiverClan. he asked if they could join," Heartstorm explained.

"W-what?" Reedstar stammered. "I just- and Ravenfall doesn't mind? Or Cloverwish? They don't mind their kits leaving *their* Clan to join ours?"

"I well - Ravenfall just wants what's best for the kits. And Cloverwish.., isn't really in on this," Heartstorm said.

"Do you know how crazy this request is?" asked Reedstar with a sigh. "You know it's a no. It's too complicated. We already have ShadowClan as a nemesis, we don't need WindClan as another one as well." Heartstorm hung his head. ShadowClan hated them because of him. "What will WindClan think? That we're stealing their kits?"

"I know. I know, I just thought I owed it to Ravenfall to ask you," Heartstorm sighed.

"You don't owe him anything. He- and WindClan- owe us," Reedstar replied firmly. "I'm sorry Heartstorm. But I know you knew it would be a no." Heartstorm nodded. He shouldn't have gotten his hopes up.

"Thanks anyways Reedstar," Heartstorm said.

"It's ok," Reedstar said, getting up then turned back. "Oh and Heartstorm."

"Yeah?" asked Heartstorm.

"Don't talk to WindClan cats over the border anymore," Reedstar replied and padded off. Heartstorm huffed. Sparkbelly spotted him from across the clearing and trotted over.

"What's up?" he asked. Heartstorm shrugged. He didn't know how he was going to tell Ravenfall.

"Nothing," mumbled Heartstorm.

"Mmmm, I can see it's something," Sparkbelly said

smartly.

"No- it's- it's nothing," sighed Heartstorm.

"Is it about Ravenfall and the kits?" asked Sparkbelly. Heartstorm's reaction must have betrayed him as Sparkbelly nodded knowingly. "You miss them don't you?"

"Yeah I er- no, " HEartstorm stammered.

"It's ok, I understand. They were there the whole time I was healing," Sparkbelly said, his tail twitching. "I miss them as well. I hope WindClan and RiverClan don't quarrel. I'd hate to see them hurt."

"Yeah. I know. Me too," Heartstorm said.

"It's kinda weird, being back," Sparkbelly said.

"What do you mean?"

"Like, I was stuck in the medicine den for so long I almost forgot what being a warrior was."

"Thank you."

"Huh?"

"Thank you. You saved my life. You risked your life. To save me," Heartstorm said, feeling emotion bubbling. "Thank you, Sparkbelly." Sparkbelly smiled.

"That's what friends are for," he said. Heartstorm smiled and nodded sadly.

"You're a real hero Sparkbelly," Heartstorm said truthfully.

"Thanks Heartstorm," said Sparkbelly. "I just did what was right." Heartstorm watched Sparkbelly pad away. He slid down to his stomach and thought about Bumblekit. Then about ShadowClan. And Brightkit. And finally, Sagekit. He gulped back

tears. He's watching from above, thought Heartstorm. He's with Brightheart. He's happy. Heartstorm smiled at the thought of Sagekit trotting about by Brightheart's side. Heartstorm saw Hawkflight talking to Rosebriar. Rosebriar was giggling and Hawkflight looked extremely pleased with himself. Heartstorm chuckled. Then Rosebriar turned to talk to Deerflame, who called her over and Hawkflight found himself alone. He spotted Heartstorm and trotted towards him. Hawkflight slipped next to Heartstorm.

"What you thinking about?" asked Hawkflight.

"StarClan," shrugged Heartstorm.

"Yeah... I think about Wolfstep all the time," Hawkflight said softly.

"Wolfstep would be so proud," Heartstorm whispered. His thoughts moved to Wolfstep. A strong, loyal grey warrior. Wolfstep had not only been one of the best warriors, he was intelligent and wise.

"I don't know though... is he?" Hawkflight said, his voice shaking. "I mean... it was because of me. He's up there because of me."

"He doesn't blame you," Heartstorm said firmly.

"How do you know?" asked Hawkflight. Heartstorm thought for a while. But he knew.

"I know, because I was your mentor. And if I had to jump into battle to save you, I would have. And if I had died, I wouldn't blame you. Because I did it for you and I would be so glad I didn't do it in vain," Heartstorm told Hawkflight truthfully. Hawkflight fought back tears.

"Thank you Heartstorm. Would you really?" he said, his voice soft.

"Of course," nodded Heartstorm. "I would do it for everybody in this Clan." Hawkflight dipped his head.

"RiverClan is lucky to have you."

Ch. 28

Heartstorm listened to the grasses sway in the breeze. Silverdrop sat beside him. The kits were in Eelfrost and Deerflame's care. Heartstorm twirled his tail around Silverdrop's. The sun was slowly setting behind the moor. There was some rustling and from the tunnel appeared Ravenfall. His eyes were dull and he looked at them hopefully.

"What did Reedstar say?" he asked. Silverdrop sighed sadly.

"I'm sorry but it will not be possible," Heartstorm said. Ravenfall looked at them in disbelief.

"What do you mean?" he asked in a small voice.

"Your kits cannot come to RiverClan," Heartstorm said.

"B-but they- they love RiverClan," stuttered Ravenfall crestfallen. Silverdrop cocked her head.

"I'm so sorry Ravenfall. You know how it is. You know it cannot be done easily," Silverdrop said soothingly.

"I just- I thought- I..," Ravenfall stammered. He hung his head. "I understand. I will tell the kits." Heartstorm sighed.

"I'm sorry. But it is what it is," Heartstorm said then got up. "We must go now." Heartstorm turned tail and Silverdrop followed him. Ravenfall watched them, his vision blurred. He then turned tail and ran back to camp.

"I'm going to miss the kits. Especially Bumblekit and Brightkit," said Silverdrop.

"I know. But we shouldn't have got attached in the first place," Heartstorm said. Silverdrop nodded in agreement.

"Want to go to the hill?" asked Silverdrop. Heartstorm

nodded.

"Of course," He said. They headed towards the hill. The ground was cold and hard but somehow the wind brought the scent of new-leaf with it. Heartstorm took deep breaths of the cool breeze.

"I can feel new-leaf approaching," smiled Silverdrop blissfully. Heartstorm nodded. They reached the top of the hill. The sun had almost set. Beautiful colours danced in the sky. Heartstorm stared up. He imagined Brightheart watching him. He imagined Sagekit playing on the hill with his siblings.

"Our kits will be apprentices soon," said Silverdrop.

"I know. I can't believe it," whispered Heartstorm.

"Yeah..., you know what Bumblekit asked me?" Silverdrop said.

"What?"

"He asked what a medicine cat's life would be."

"Why?"

"Haven't you noticed his interest in herbs and bushes? How he likes learning new things about healing? How he loves going to visit Frogleap?"

"I-I... no! I haven't noticed!" Heartstorm frowned. He hadn't ever thought of his kits becoming a medicine cat. It had never occurred to him. He had assumed they were both going to grow up to become the best warriors. That they would fight, hunt and protect their Clan.

"Are you upset?" asked Silverdrop, raising her eyebrow.

"I-I'm not! But I... does he really want to become a medicine cat?"

"He never said he wanted to. But I can see he is

interested. I've talked to him about it. But he's dropped a few hints that you think he's going to become a warrior. I think he doesn't want to disappoint you."

"So he's not considering becoming a medicine cat?"

"Well, not if you don't give him the blessing."

"Oh ok."

"You're going to tell him to do whatever he wants, won't you?"

"Yeah, he'll be a great warrior." Silverdrop gave Heartstorm a serious look.

"Heartstorm....," Silverdrop said slowly. "That's not what I meant."

"I don't- I don't want him to become like Frogleap! Imagine how dull it must be to be a medicine cat! I wouldn't want that for him!" exclaimed Heartstorm indignantly.

"Heartstorm!" Silverdrop looked outraged. "Our kits can become whatever they want as long as they are helping their Clan! I will be proud of them forever!"

"I know I know! Don't get mad! It's just-"

"Heartstorm," growled Silverdrop, interrupting him.

"Ok ok ok. I just... I've never really *liked* medicine cats. They're grumpy... and Lionbreeze literally attacked me and-"

"This isn't about Frogleap or Lionbreeze. Bumblekit is different. If he wants to become a medicine cat he could very well become the best and kindest medicine cat."

"I know... I'm sorry," Heartstorm said, and he was. He realised he was being stupid. He wanted Bumblekit to do what he liked. He wanted Bumblekit to become the best cat he could be. And maybe that cat would not be a warrior, but a medicine cat.

"So you'll support his choice?" asked Silverdrop.

"I will," nodded Heartstorm.

"Then you should talk to him. Encourage him to become a medicine cat. Frogleap is getting old. Who is going to take care of the Clan after him? Who is going to heal hurt cats? RiverClan needs another medicine cat and Bumblekit could be it," Silverdrop said.

"Yeah," nodded Heartstorm thoughtfully. "He'd be the best medicine cat RiverClan could ever be. He'd save lives." Silverdrop chuckled and nodded.

"Brightkit would protect RiverClan lives and Bumblekit would save lives," Silverdrop said. Heartstorm nodded. As he thought about it, being a medicine cat meant not going into battle. He preferred it that way. So that Bumblekit would never need to fight. Bumblekit would never know the pain of getting scratched. He jut hoped he'd be able to protect Brightkit.

"I'll give Bumblekit my blessing. I'll be proud of him no matter what. Proud of all three of them," Heartstorm said. Silverdrop whispered Sagekit's name softly and leaned her head against Heartstorm's shoulder. They remained silent for a while. Stars were beginning to appear above them. The half moon shone brightly.

"Have you told Reedstar or Frogleap about Bumblekit yet?" asked Heartstorm.

"Not yet. I wanted to talk to you about it first. And you need to talk to Bumblekit first as well," Silverdrop replied.

"I will talk to Bumblekit tomorrow," Heartstorm assured Silverdrop.

"Good," nodded Silverdrop, her eyes drooping.

"You're tired," Heartstorm said. "We should get back." He was slightly worried for her. He also hoped the kits were alright and that Eelfrost hadn't done anything too crazy with them although Deerflame was there as well and she would keep him in line. He

also hoped the kits weren't disturbing Eelfrost and Deerflame too much. But he also wanted to stay. He wanted to stay beside Silverdrop and watched the stars. He wanted to feel her warmth and let her feel his. To show her how much he loved her. He breathed in the fresh night air and snuggled closer to Silverdrop.

"No," said Silverdrop tiredly. "Let's just stay a little longer."

Ch. 29

Heartstorm, Reedstar, Blacktail, Eelfrost, Sparkbelly, Deerflame and Embergaze waited by the ThunderClan border. Heartstorm twitched.

"Are they even going to come?" huffed Eelfrost. The air was fresh and a few leaves had started to grow on the trees. The ground was covered in new green grass.

"Be patient Eelfrost," sighed Deerflame although she looked just as impatient.

"Well, next time, let's be late," huffed Eelfrost. "See how they like it."

"Get a taste of their own medicine," nodded Heartstorm. Just then, there was a strong whiff of ThunderClan and Falconstar appeared along with other ThunderClan warriors.

"Here they come," muttered Reedstar.

"Greetings RiverClan," Falconstar said. "We apologise for being late." Eelfrost scoffed. Blacktail turned back and gave him a stern look.

"Sorry," murmured Eelfrost.

"Anything about ShadowClan?" asked Reedstar.

"Nothing. They're keeping back," replied Falconstar.

"They're cowards," hissed Darkstorm from Waspnose's side.

"It is either good news or bad news," Falconstar interrupted.

"We're tired of ShadowClan threatening us but not doing

anything," growled Waspnose. "We think we should do something." Reedstar frowned.

"No," Blacktail said. "If they do not attack or make a move against us, we will not either." Darkstorm growled.

"Cowards," he spat. Waspnose shoved him away.

"Shut up Darkstorm," he retorted.

"We're not here to fight RiverClan," said Falconstar then turned to Blacktail and Reedstar. "We want to attack before they attack us."

"We do not think so," Reedstar replied firmly. "We should not attack. Not now."

"We don't want to wait for them to attack us," put in Waspnose. "We should attack first."

"No, RiverClan will not be attacking first," Reedstar announced.

"So you're backing out? We can and will fight ShadowClan without you then! But that means our small truce and teaming up against ShadowClan is gone," Falconstar said, narrowing his eyes, his tail twitching. Reedstar frowned and murmured something to Blacktail.

"No, we do not want that. But don't you think, we should think more about attacking ShadowClan without reason first? And maybe plan it out," Reedstar said.

"Of course we must plan it out!" exclaimed Waspnose.

"Yes we will plan it out but we can only start planning it with you when you *agree* to attack ShadowClan," Falconstar said, raising his eyebrows.

"Alright, give us a quarter moon to think about it," Reedstar said with a curt nod. Falconstar's jaw muscles tightened but he nodded then they turned and were gone. Heartstorm huffed.

"We've got to attack ShadowClan, they're just cowards!" hissed Eelfrost.

"Eelfrost...," trailed of Deerflame.

"We must talk to the Clan about it," Reedstar told them and they all made their way back to camp.

"I think we should not attack," Blacktail said. "If ThunderClan attack them, then they will be weakened and will not be able to attack us."

"And what will ThunderClan think about us? They will also attack us," Reedstar countered then sighed. "We need to tell the whole Clan first. And we will vote." Heartstorm nodded in agreement. When they reached camp, Reedstar immediately called a Clan meeting. Heartstorm stood at the back with Silverdrop, his kits and his two best friends. Deerflame smiled at Brightkit.

"So, are you excited to become an apprentice?" she asked.

"SO excited!" cried Brightkit. "I'm going to be the best warrior." Deerflame smiled.

"I don't doubt it," Deerflame nodded.

"I'm going to become ThunderClan's leader and Bumblekit can be my deputy," Brightkit said. bumblekit shrugged. Silverdrop turned to Heartstorm, giving him a meaningful look. Heartstorm sighed.

"I'll talk to him after this," Heartstorm said. Reedstar retold everything that had happened that morning. Whispers and chatter broke out at the mention of attacking ShadowClan.

"We must vote," Reedstar announced. "Everybody's vote, which does not include the kits, will vote on whether they want to fight with ThunderClan against ShadowClan."

"Those for yes, will go towards the camp entrance and the medicine den," said Blacktail. "And those voting against to the nursery." Cats talked amongst themselves and started to break off.

Heartstorm remembered Silverdrop's dream. He hoped never to have war against another Clan. Especially ShadowClan. He didn't want his kits or Silverdrop to be hurt.

"Are you for or against?" asked Eelfrost.

"Against," Heartstorm said firmly.

"How bout you Eelfrost?" asked Deerflame.

"I kinda think ShadowClan deserves this," Eelfrost shrugged. "And anyways, Heartstorm, you can get revenge." Heartstorm frowned.

"I don't need revenge. I hold nothing against them. Because of them I have the best friends, kits and mate I could ever ask for," replied Heartstorm. Silverdrop nodded to the kits who scuttled to the nursery.

"There is no need for a fight against ShadowClan," Silverdrop said. Heartstorm nodded and joined her towards the nursery. Deerflame padded with them. Eelfrost's jaw dropped.

"What? None of you are for?" He asked. Deerflame gave him a meaningful look.

"You don't know what will happen. There will be many injuries...," Deerflame said softly. "It's going to be a real battle, Eelfrost. Not something in your mind. Not just a dream. It's going to be bloody. It's going to be real." Eelfrost frowned then padded towards the nursery with Heartstorm, Deerflame and Silverdrop. Sparkbelly trotted towards them.

"I don't want to have to fight," he said.

"You made a right choice," smiled Silverdrop. Heartstorm watched as cats shuffled towards the camp entrance. He willed more cats to come to their side. He saw Reedstar go towards the medicine den and sighed. Most cats would take their leader's example and he was right, the cats sitting undecided in the middle followed Reedstar. Blacktail joined Heartstorm near the nursery.

"I don't think fighting is the answer to anything," Blacktail told Heartstorm. "And I'm glad you don't think so either." Heartstorm smiled. Hawkflight trotted towards them.

"I don't want what happened to Wolfstep to ever happen again," he said firmly. Rainfeather joined them. Deerflame smiled and nuzzled her happily.

"I don't know what your feather is thinking," sighed Rainfeather in Deerflame's ear.

"The vote has been cast," announced Reedstar from the other side of camp. Heartstorm's chest clenched and he bit his tongue. It was easy to see the majority of the camp was for fighting against ShadowClan.

"We will fight alongside ThunderClan," declared Reedstar, walking towards the middle of camp. There were a few cheers. Heartstorm turned to Silverdrop. She dropped her head.

"It's ok...," she murmured. "It'll be alright."

"Of course, I will be talking to Blacktail about this," Reedstar continued. "If we have any doubts, for example, ThunderClan's loyalties or if we think ShadowClan is no real threat, we will not fight." ShadowClan was not a real threat, Heartstorm thought angrily. He dropped his head. It felt too real. They would fight against ShadowClan. He felt fear flooding through him. He realised how much he dreaded this. He never wanted to see ShadowClan again. He never wanted to see Clawstar's eyes burning with hatred or Lionbreeze's smug look or Honeylight's soft eyes. She seemed unreal. Part of his imagination. He closed his eyes and buried his face in Silverdrop's pelt.

Heartstorm licked Bumblekit affectionately on the head.

"Bumblekit, come walk with me near the river," Heartstorm said. Bumblekit nodded eagerly. Brightkit was with Thornstar, learning new tricks. Silverdrop smiled approvingly. Heartstomr led Bumblekit towards the stream, his mind whirling.

"I just wanted to talk to you," Heartstorm started.

"We're fighting ShadowClan," said Bumblekit, interrupting. "But why?"

"Because..., because they're- they've been threatening us," Heartstorm replied slowly. "And er..., well, I guess because if we don't, ThunderClan will probably rage a war upon us as well." Bumblekit nodded.

"You know, I don't really ever want to fight," whispered Bumblekit. Heartstorm sighed and nodded. He realised Silverdrop was right. Bumblekit would be a true and good medicine cat.

"Yeah, and that's ok," Heartstorm told Bumblekit firmly. Bumblekit looked up, his eyes wide.

"Really?" he frowned. "But don't you want me to be a great warrior? And fight like Brightkit?"

"No Bumblekit," Heartstorm said. "I want you to be a cat that helps his Clan loyally. Whether that means healing injured cats or fighting for their Clan." Bumblekit smiled brightly and touched his paw to the water.

"Thanks Dad," he said.

"I'll be proud of you no matter what, understand?" Heartstorm told Bumblekit, his heart bursting with warmth.

"Thanks," whispered Bumblekit. "You don't mind that I might become a medicine cat?"

"No," Heartstorm said and he meant it. He was so glad that Bumblekit would have nothing to do with fighting that he might never get hurt. That Bumblekit would never have to face another opponent, hissing at his face. If they fought against ThunderClan, he would have one less cat to worry about.

"You're going to be a great medicine cat. Better than Frogleap, but don't tell him I told you that" Heartstorm said. "You know, in a way, you're saving RiverClan."

"Really?" asked Bumblekit, excited. "how?"

"Frogleap is growing old. We need a new medicine cat apprentice and quick. RiverClan needs you to become their next medicine cat," Heartstorm told his kit grandly.

"I'll be the best medicine cat," Bumblekit nodded, looking purposefully. "I will make you proud."

Ch. 30

"They're almost six moons," Silverdrop said. Heartstorm nodded.

"I know," he said. "You've told Reedstar and Frogleap?"

"I have. They're glad," Silverdrop nodded. "And Frogleap even smiled." Heartstorm chuckled.

"They're so big now...," Heartstorm trailed off. "I know Brightkit is so enthusiastic and really good at fighting but... I don't want her to get hurt."

"She's going to be fine," Silverdrop said firmly. "I know she will. She talks to me about protecting Bumblekit. She can see that's he's not as.. keen to fight."

"That's cute," smiled Heartstorm.

"I know. I wonder who's going to mentor them," Silverdrop pondered.

"Well, I know Frogleap will be mentoring Bumblekit," Heartstorm chuckled.

"I know," Silverdrop rolled her eyes. "But who will mentor Brightkit?"

"I hope it's Eelfrost," grinned Heartstorm. "He'd be a great mentor."

"I'd rather Deerflame," Silverdrop put in. Heartstorm rolled his eyes but smiled.

"And you're going to be coming back to the warrior's den," enthused Heartstorm.

"I'm going to miss the nursery. It's quiet and super

comfortable. Although I can't wait to get back to my duties."

"I can't wait to sleep in the same den as you."

"Hey lovebirds," came a voice. Heartstorm knew immediately it was Eelfrost.

"Hey Eely," he teased.

"Hi Hearty," grinned back Eelfrost, settling down beside him. "Hey Silverdrop."

"Hi Eelfrost," Silverdrop answered.

"So, do you guys think I'll get to mentor Bumblekit or Brighkit?" asked Eelfrost.

"Eelfrost," Heartstorm said. "Bumblekit is going to become a medicine cat." Eelfrost' s jaw dropped and he was speechless for a moment. Then he sprung to his feet and howled.

"That's great!" he exclaimed then bent down and whispered in Heartstorm's ear. "When Deerflame and I have kits, I want one of them to become a medicine cat. And maybe Bumblekit will be able to mentor him or her." Silverdrop laughed.

"You've got everything planned out," she smiled.

"Yup," nodded Eelfrost happily. "So, I'll let you guys enjoy your time. I've got to tell this to Deerflame... unless you want to tell her?"

"No, it's ok. I can see you're bursting to. Go tell her," Heartstorm told Eelfrost. Eelfrost grinned.

"Thanks," He said before sprinting off.

"You know, I think that Eelfrost would actually be a good mentor," Silverdrop shrugged. Just then Bumblekit, Brightkit, Heatherkit and Daisykit burst out squealing and screaming.

"You're never going to catch me stupid WindClan

warrior!" cried Brightkit, leaping into the water. She paddled furiously away from Daisykit.

"I'm not WindClan! I'm a fox!" cried Daisykit. Heatherkit leapt at Brightkit from the side of the stream and they crawled out of the water. They started to wrestle and Daisykit jumped into the fight. Brighkit was the strongest. She threw Heatherkit off and bit Daisykit on the tail before swiping at her head. Daisykit was disorientated.

"Run Bumblekit!" cried Brightkit. "I'll keep them back." Bumblekit nodded and hurried away. Heatherkit leapt after him but Brightkit bundled into her. Daisykit bit into Brightkit and tried to pull her off but Brightkit twisted away and was off, after her brother. Daisykit and Heaterkit huffed then chased after them. Heartstorm and Silverdrop watched amusedly. The air was fresh and the sun was up in the cloudless sky. It was clear that new-leaf had arrived. Heartstorm tasted the fresh air and smiled. Prey had come back to their territory and the fresh-kill pile was getting duller by the day. Their camp had been cleared out and every cat was significantly more excited and joyous. Heartstorm loved hearing the kits squealing, birds singing and the rushing of water. He closed his eyes and soaked in the happy feeling.

Ch. 31

Heartstorm jolted awake. He leapt to his feet and lashed out his tail excitedly. Outside, the birds hadn't started to sing yet and the sun was only beginning to rise. Only a few cats were starting to stir, getting ready for the first dawn patrols of the day. Heartstorm though, had other things in mind, like his kits. His kits! They were six moons old today! Heartstorm ran over to Eelfrost's nest and nudged him. Eelfrost groaned and turned away. Heartstorm sighed and prodded Deerflame instead. She blinked her eyes open.

"Oh hi Heartstorm," she mumbled.

"They're going to be apprentices!" Heartstorm whispered loudly. Deerflame smiled and slowly got up.

"I know," she mumbled. "I'm really glad."

"See you later!" cried Heartstorm, rushing out of the den. He wanted to shout to everybody. He rushed to the nursery and he was surprised to see that it was already lively. Brightkit burst out before Heartstorm could enter. She was a little bundle of excitement and joy. She smiled at Heartstorm. Her head reached his shoulder and she was lean.

"We're becoming apprentices today!" Brightkit exclaimed. Heartstorm grinned.

"I know!" He cried. "You're six moons old!" He licked Brightkit lovingly. She rushed off to the elders den. Heartstorm slipped into the nursery. Cloudbreeze was already there with Acornheart. He spotted Silverdrop talking to Bumblekit who had a frown on his face. Heartstorm bent down behind his kit and prodded him.

"You're becoming an apprentice!" he said. Bumblekit

nodded.

"I know," he mumbled.

"He's nervous," Silverdrop explained. "Don't be. You don't have anything to worry about."

"Do I have to say anything?" asked Bumblekit worriedly. "What if I don't know the answer."

"I don't think there will be questions " reassured Heartstorm. "But if there are, I know you will be able to answer them."

"There *might* be questions?" asked Bumblekit, his eyes wide. Silverdrop rolled her eyes but gave Bumblekit a loving lick.

"You can do it. I don't know how medicine cat apprentice cermonies go...," Silverdrop said.

"I can do it I can do it I can do it," repeated Bumblekit. Heatherkit rushed to him.

"I'm so excited," cried Heatherkit.

"I know, it's a big day and Bumblekit..., stop it," Heartstorm sighed. "Don't be so nervous. It'll be fine. You're supposed to be celebrating like your sister."

"Yeah," added Daisykit, padding over. "We were supposed to be apprentices *yesterday*. But we had to wait to become apprentices with you and Brightkit."

"When will be the ceremony?" asked Heatherkit to her mother.

"I don't know. In the afternoon, I expect," Acornheart said.

"Yes Bumblekit, you have plenty of time till then," assured Silverdrop.

"Afternoon...," mumbled Bumblekit.

"Come on," Heartstorm told Bumblekit. "You should be really excited. You're going to see RiverClan territory. You'll get to go out of camp for the first time."

"I suppose that would be fun," Bumblekit shrugged. "There must be loads of plants and animals I could see that aren't in camp."

"Yes yes, think of all the new things you're going to see!" pushed Heartstorm. Eelfrost burst into the nursery.

"Bumblekit and Brightkit! You're going to be apprentices!" he yelled. Acornheart raised her eyebrow and Cloudbreeze took a step back. Heartstorm burst out laughing and trotted over to his best friend.

"Finally woke up, eh?" he teased.

"Of course, it's your kits' special day," Eelfrost said, nudging Bumblekit happily. Daisykit and Heatherkit looked up at him, their brows furrowed.

"Oh and you guys are becoming apprentices as well!" Eelfrost added. "Happy for you." Silverdrop chuckled.

"I'll be going back to the warrior's den. I hope my nest is still there," Silverdrop said.

"Nope, I took it," Eelfrost joked.

"Don't worry, I made sure it was safe," smiled Heartstorm. Blacktail poked her head into the nursery.

"Oh there you are. Can you both come on a hunting patrol with us, please?" asked Blacktail. Eelfrost nodded and trotted after her. Heartstorm gave Bumblekit a quick lick on the head.

"Don't get worked up, ok?" He told his kit and padded after Blacktail and Eelfrost.

Heartstorm dug his teeth into a plump mouse. He finished it quickly, savouring its sweet juicy taste. He licked his lips.

"Mmm, haven't had a fat mouse in seasons," Heartstorm said. Eelfrost nodded enthusiastically, just finishing his vole. They had had the best hunting patrol since leaf-bare had begun. They had even found a nest of pigeons.

"Hey," Eelfrost cried, flicking his tail towards the High Rock. "Reedstar's climbing up." Heartstorm's eyes widened. He sprang to his feet and raced to the nursery. Silverdrop had forced the kits to have a nap as they had spent their whole day being excited and talking to other cats. She wanted them alert and wide awake for their ceremony. Silverdrop prodded the kits awake and they trotted outside. Silverdrop licked Bumblekit clean of sand while Heartstorm forced Brightkit to keep still. He flattened the fur behind her ears and tried to groom her messy fur.

"What have you done to yourself?" he muttered.

"Thornstar and I fought in a thorn bush," declared Brightkit proudly. Heartstorm rolled his eyes. It was just before afternoon and cats were all getting up to see what was going on. Acornheart was grooming Daisykit and Cloudbreeze was calming a jittery Heatherkit. Bumblekit looked at Heatherkit.

"Don't worry, you're going to do great," he said. Heatherkit smiled and wiggled her tail.

"Thanks," she said. Then Reedstar called the Clan gathering. Every cat gathered below the High Rock. Heartstorm finished grooming Brighkit. He couldn't help but feel so overwhelmed and as excited as Brightkit. He was almost as nervous as Bumblekit and he felt so many different emotions bubbling inside him.

"Daisykit, Heatherkit, Bumblekit, Brightkit, come up," Reedstar ordered. Brightkit leapt to her feet and marched towards the High Rock, head held high. Heartstorm bit his tongue, feeling so proud. Bumblekit glanced back at Silverdrop and Heartstorm. They nodded to him encouragingly. They joined Reedstar at the High Rock. Heartstorm watched them feeling like the proudest cat on earth. He wanted to jump up and say "those are my kits!". He watched them standing there and thought about how big they were.

They were going to become the best apprentices ever.

"I can't believe it..," whispered Heartstorm. "They're really going to be apprentices." Reedstar recited the words to become an apprentice to Heatherkit and Daisykit first as they were older. Heartstorm's eyes widened and grinned happily when Reedstar announced that Daisypaw's mentor would be Deerflame. Deerflame beamed proudly and touched noses with Daisypaw. Heatherpaw's mentor was Smallear and they touched noses. Heartstorm spotted Cloudbreeze and Acornheart standing proudly, twirling tails. Then it was Brightkit and Bumblekit's turn.

"Brightkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Brightpaw. Your mentor will be Eelfrost. I hope Eelfrost will pass down all he knows on to you," declared Reedstar grandly. Heartstorm's breath caught. Eelfrost was Brightkit's mentor! He felt the need to jump up in the air and whoop.

"Eelfrost, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Beestripe, and you have shown yourself to be a great warrior and very enthusiastic. You will be the mentor of Brightpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to her," continued Reedstar. He beamed non- stop as he watched Brightpaw, his kit, touch noses with Eelfrost. Brightpaw was an apprentice. Heartstorm smiled at Brightpaw. She caught his eye and winked. Heartstorm chuckled. Then it was Bumblekit's turn.

They're apprentices!" cried Silverdrop excitedly. "our kits are apprentices!"

"I know!" exclaimed Heartstorm, giving Silverdrop a quick excited lick.

"Heatherpaw! Daisypaw!" chanted the Clan. "Bumblepaw! Brightpaw!" The yowls and cheers echoed as the apprentices leapt off the Rock. Heartstorm and Silverdrop joined in with the chants.

"BRIGHTPAW! BUMBLEPAW!" bellowed Heartstorm.

Silverdrop giggled. "What?"

"You're so cute," shrugged Silverdrop with a cheeky smile. Heartstorm pushed through the crowds until he found his kits. Everybody was congratulating them. Heartstorm was so happy to see everybody being so warm to his kits. He reached them and nuzzled them affectionately.

"You guys are apprentices!" he told them excitedly. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks," smiled Bumblepaw. "It wasn't too bad." Frogleap appeared and flicked his tail.

"Let's go," he said. Bumblepaw's eyes widened.

"We're going to see the territory?" he asked.

"Yes," nodded Frogleap. Bumblepaw grinned and ran after Frogleap. Brightpaw joined Eelfrost after a while.

"Hey Eelfrost," grinned Heartstorm joining them. "I'm so glad you're her mentor."

"'Course, I'm the best," smiled Eelfrost then motioned to the camp entrance. "Let's go see RiverClan, eh?" Brightpaw trotted after him excitedly.

"I bet it's ten times bigger than camp," she exclaimed.

"Nah, more like twenty," Eelfrost said back. Soon, all the apprentices had gone with their mentors and the crowd dissipated. Silverdrop joined Heartstorm's side. He watched Brightpaw disappear, exiting camp for the first time.

"I can't believe this. They're so big so quickly," muttered Heartstorm to Silverdrop. He suddenly felt slightly sad. His kits were gone. They were now exploring RiverClan. They weren't going to be tiny kits that needed protecting forever.

"Hey, are you sad?" Silverdrop questioned, running her tail along his side.

"I don't know.... I should be happy. I'm so happy...., but they're- they're gone.. I mean, now they're going to be doing apprentice things we won't see them as much," Heartstorm shrugged.

"Come on, we should take a walk. You'll be seeing a lot more of me now that I'm a warrior again," Silverdrop said then seeing Heartstorm's still sad face. "Don't worry. Your kits won't forget you. You're still their father, their parent. You always will be."

Ch. 32

"It was awesome!" exclaimed Brightpaw. Heartstorm and Brightpaw were sitting underneath the shade of a tree. It was evening and the air was cool and calming. "I knew RiverClan's territory would be as big as I imagined! It was awesome. Eelfrost started with showing me basic stalking skills so I could learn hunting but I already learnt it with Thornstar so he taught me how to crouch and leap and I caught a pigeon! A really fat pigeon!" Heartstorm smiled.

"That's great. I'm so proud of you," Heartstorm said. "Did you get to see the borders?"

"I did!" cried Brightpaw then made a face. "WindClan smells *so* weird and ThunderClan, don't even get me started. They stink. Like worst than skunks." Heartstorm laughed.

"Have you ever smelt a skunk?" asked Heartstorm.

"No, but I'm sure it's better than ThunderClan," shrugged Brightpaw. "Anyways, tomorrow I managed to convince Eelfrost to teach me fighting techniques. He wanted to teach me how to patrol and learn a bit more about being a warrior first but I really want to show him my moves and I want to start getting better at fighting. I want to be the strongest cat in all the Clans when I'm older. Have you talked to Bumblepaw yet? I've got to tell him I caught my first pigeon."

"Not yet," Heartstorm said. He got up to talk to Eelfrost. "You go talk to him. I'm going to see Eelfrost for a moment." He trotted away towards Eelfrost who was talking excitedly to Deerflame.

"I never knew being a mentor would be so fun and easy," grinned Eelfrost.

"It's not, " retorted Deerflame then smiled. "But Daisypaw learnt to crouch and leap perfectly."

"Well Brightpaw caught a pigeon!" replied Eelfrost smugly.

"Hey Eelfrost," called Heartstorm.

"Oh hey there my apprentice's father," Eelfrost smiled then padded over. "What's up? Brightpaw tell you what a great mentor I was?"

"Yeah yeah, she did," said Heartstorm. "And she said you were going to teach her fighting moves tomorrow."

"Oh yeah, she's going to do great," nodded Eelfrost.

"Don't you think you're rushing into things?" put in Heartstorm.

"No of course not, why?" Eelfrost frowned.

"You should let her get to know our territory. Tell her about the warrior code. Maybe bring her on a few border patrols," suggested Heartstorm. "Then teach her basic hunting. *Then* fighting. That's what I did with Hawkflight."

"Really?" Eelfrost raised an eyebrow. "Don't you want her to learn to fight? Be the best warrior?"

"I do, but being a warrior isn't only about fighting," Heartstorm told Eelfrost firmly. "Don't rush into things. I'm not telling you what to do but..."

"I'm sorry," muttered Eelfrost. "You're right. I had planned all of it out... It's just she was so excited and I wanted to meet her expectations and I didn't want to disappoint her. I didn't want to say no..."

"You're her mentor. You can say no. Brightpaw is really excited. She's a great cat. I know she will be a great warrior but only if you mentor her well. That means saying no sometimes," Heartstorm said. "You've got to be a bit hard. You can't always want

her to like you: Plus, there's nothing that can make her not like you. You're my best friend." Eelfrost gave a small smile.

"Thanks," he said, flicking his tail.

"No problem," smiled Heartstorm. He spotted Frogleap and Bumblekpaw walking out of the medicine den. Brightpaw burst out of the medicine den and pelted towards the apprentice den. Bumblepaw spotted Heartstorm and trotted over to him.

"Hi," said Bumblepaw.

"hey, how was your day?" asked Heartstorm excitedly.

"It was great," reported Bumblepaw, sitting next to Heartstorm. "Frogleap showed me around the territory and we got to see all the main spots."

"Oh yeah? Like the borders and the clearing where you can train?" asked Heartstorm.

"What?" Bumblepaw said looking confused. "No. Like where all the main herb patches grow. He showed me this place where there's *loads* of moss. I can bring you there if you like and you can get some extra moss." Heartstorm smiled at Bumblepaw's excitement. He didn't understand why Bumblepaw was so excited about moss but he didn't care. Bumblepaw was becoming a medicine cat! He couldn't have been prouder.

"That would be great," said Heartstorm. "How was Frogleap?"

"He's actually not grumpy," Bumblepaw said. "He's really nice to me."

"I'm glad," smiled Heartstorm. "So you'll be sleeping in the apprentice den from now on."

"Yup," grinned Bumblepaw. "It'll be weird, not sleeping in the nursery. The apprentice den is gigantic though! And it's only four of us!"

"Which nest did you chose?" asked Heartstorm.

"There are like six nests, I took the one all the way at the back. I hate being near the entrance and feeling the draft. Brightpaw took a nest like right beside the entrance."

"That sounds like her," nodded Heartstorm.

"Heatherpaw and Daisypaw have nests on the other side. I'm going to see them now, if you don't mind," Bumblepaw said.

"Of course, go ahead," nodded Heartstorm. He watched as Bumblepaw disappeared into the apprentice den. He trotted to the warrior's den where Silverdrop was talking to Deerflame. They both looked up and smiled at him.

"How was training for your kits?" asked Deerflame.

"Great, they loved it," smiled Heartstorm. "They'll soon find out it's not all fun and games. How was your first day as a mentor?"

"I can't believe it," exclaimed Deerflame. "I mean, it's so fun and I love it. I love teaching kits. I think I want to do it forever. It's so nice to see them learn new things and be so happy."

"I know," nodded Heartstorm knowingly. "I felt the same."

"Yeah, it's like she's my own kit," Deerflame nodded then spotted Eelfrost. She bounded towards him. Silverdrop smiled at Heartstorm and nodded to her nest.

"I'm back to warrior duties," she grinned. "I've already been around the whole territory. I'm glad my six moons stuck sleeping in the nursery is over, although it was pretty quiet and calm."

"I'm happy that you're back in here with me," agreed Heartstorm. "The kits seem to love being apprentices. They're already talking about where they're sleeping. They're glad to be independent now."

"I know Brightkit told me all about how she loves our

territory," chuckled Silverdrop then ran her tail along Heartstorm's side. "Don't look so sad. They're grown now." Heartstorm sighed.

"I know," he nodded. "Want to go for a walk?"

"Sure," smiled Silverdrop. They padded out of camp, tails entwined.

Ch. 33

Heartstorm and Silverdrop were sitting underneath the shade of trees after going on a tiring hunting patrol. They shared a plump vole happily. They watched the coming and goings of cats in the camp. Suddenly, Brightpaw burst into camp. In her mouth was clamped a mouse and a vole.

"I caught a vole and mouse!" she yelled, rushing towards Heatherpaw who was laying by the apprentice den. Heatherpaw looked astonished.

"Wow, that's so cool," she gasped. "I've only learnt the positions for stalking and crouching!"

"I know," Brightpaw said, puffing out her chest. "I caught a pigeon yesterday. It's easy, once you get the feel of it." Just then Smallear trotted towards Heatherpaw, breaking the conversation. He flicked his tail at his apprentice.

"Right, let's go," he said. "We're going on the border patrol." Heatherpaw's eyes lit up. Brightpaw scanned the clearing and spotted her parents. She rushed towards them eagerly.

"I caught a mouse and vole!" she told them proudly. Heartstorm smiled. Silverdrop nodded proudly.

"I know, they're very big," said Silverdrop. "You're a great apprentice." Heartstorm was so glad his own kit was catching prey on her second day of apprenticeship. He watched fondly as Brightpaw brought them to the elders.

"She's going to be a good warrior," Heartstorm commented.

"Hunting is so fun," grinned Brightpaw returning to her parents.

"I thought you said you preferred fighting?" asked Heartstorm.

"Yeah...," shrugged Brightpaw. "I like doing both."

"Where's Eelfrost?" remarked Silverdrop.

"Oh, he's at the clearing. He said he was going to teach me a bit more of what being an apprentice is. But of course I know. It's about taking care of the elders and learning to be the best warrior. And he said he wanted to talk about the warrior code and what it takes to be a warrior. I just want to learn to fight," ranted Brightpaw.

"Well, aren't you supposed to go see him?" Silverdrop pointed out.

"Oh yeah," nodded Brightpaw. She flashed a smile at her parents and ran off.

"I'm happy Eelfrost isn't jumping headfirst into battle training," noted Heartstorm. Silverdrop agreed. She spotted Embergaze.

"I said I was going to the border patrol," Silverdrop said, tapping her tail to Heartstorm's shoulder. "Do you want to come?" She walked towards Embergaze.

"Sure," nodded Heartstorm. He got up and followed Silverdrop. Embergaze nodded to them.

"Just waiting for Hawkflight and Moorpelt," Embergaze said. Hawkflight and Moorpelt entered the camp moments later and they were off. Hawkflight trotted by Heartstorm's side.

"Isn't it great?" asked Hawkflight. "That your kits are apprentices? I remember being so happy."

"Yeah, it is," nodded Heartstorm, remembering Wolfstep.

"I wish I could've been a mentor but I guess maybe next time," shrugged Hawkflight.

"Of course," Heartstorm reassured. "You'd be a great mentor."

"Thanks," beamed Hawkflight. "Bumblepaw is becoming a medicine cat! I think it's great. Being a medicine cat is hard."

"I know, but he can do it," Heartstorm said.

"Of course," exclaimed Heartstorm, "Bumblepaw's a smart cat." They reached the WindClan border and marked the border quickly. Embergaze gazed out at the moor silently.

"WindClan's been quite distant these past few weeks," he noted aloud.

"What do you mean?" asked Moorpelt.

"They've been marking the border," pointed out Silverdrop.

"Yes..., but it's sort of their duty. I wouldn't be surprised if something is going between them and ShadowClan," Embergaze said darkly. Heartstorm frowned.

"They've always been scared of ShadowClan," agreed Moorpelt. "I reckon if ShadowClan did ask to be alliances they would say yes in a second."

"Stupid WindClan," muttered Hawkflight. They border patrol turned back, walking leisurely through the forest. They talked about the going ons in the Clan, mostly about the new apprentices. Heartstorm felt his heart bubble with pride everytime somebody mentioned his kits. Silverdrop stopped him near the side of the rushing river.

"Let's stay here for a while," she suggested. Heartstorm shrugged and nodded. When the patrol was out of sight, Silverdrop looked up at the tree top.

"What is it?" asked Heartstorm. Silverdrop smiled cheekily and scrambled up the bark of a tree. She hauled herself up onto the first branch and looked down at Heartstorm smugly. He sighed. He was not going to climb. He hated the feel of the bark getting stuck

under his claws. He hated the way things spun when he was too high off the ground. He hated feeling as if his claws were going to pop off after holding onto the bark for dear life. He hated climbing.

"I'm not climbing up if that's what you're thinking," Heartstorm told her firmly.

"Why not?" taunted Silverdrop. "Scared?"

"I'm not scared..., actually, I am," Heartstorm told her. "And I'm not climbing up there."

"What would our kits say?" teased Silverdrop. "Their dad, a cat, scared to climb."

"Only ThunderClan climbs trees," Heartstorm retorted.

"Oh come on," Silverdrop flicked her tail. "Don't be so boring. I'll help you."

"I'm not climbing!" Heartstorm told her. "I almost died last time."

"No you didn't," Silverdrop answered. Heartstorm looked down at the ground and at the flowing water.

"How about we swim? A race," Heartstorm suggested instead, narrowing his eyes. Silverdrop nodded and leapt off the branch. Heartstorm's eyes widened but Silverdrop nimbly landed on her feet.

"You're on," grinned Silverdrop. She then jumped into the river. Heartstorm leapt in right after. The water was cold but the sun was shining and the sky clear. Heartstorm found it natural. He was in the correct position and started to paddle swiftly down the stream. He followed the current of water. He remembered Blacktail coaching him. He remembered swimming with Eelfrost and Deerflame, when they had been apprentices. He pushed harder. Silverdrop was already passing the next bend. Her head was almost submerged and she looked totally concentrated. Heartstorm pushed harder until his nose was almost touching her tail. He paddled faster. Soon, they were almost side by side.

"come on Heartstorm, you call that swimming?" Silverdrop yelled, turning around. She then shot off. Heartstorm cursed and tried to slide and follow the current. He remembered Blacktail telling him to let the current guide him. He let himself be taken by the current and he followed its movement. He found himself going swiftly forward. It felt great. He wasn't cold anymore. He knew exactly where he was going. He passed Silverdrop easily. She let out an angry cry. Finally, he pulled himself out of the water and shook himself. He chuckled when Silverdrop hauled herself onto the bank a moment later. He smiled at she playfully bit him on the ear. They sat by the river, letting the sun dry their damp fur.

Ch. 34

Somebody was prodding Heartstorm relentlessly. He groaned and rolled over. He slowly blinked his eyes open. He stared up at Bumblepaw. He shot up, suddenly awake but quickly yawned.

"Good morning," he said tiredly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Bumblepaw lightly. "It's almost dawn."

"Almost?" groaned Heartstorm. "It's so early."

"I'm going," Bumblepaw said.

"Huh?" asked Heartstorm confused.

"I'm going to the *Moonpool*," Bumblepaw rolled his eyes. Heartstorm's eyes widened.

"The Moonpool? Now? What?" he stammered.

"Yeah, so that I can really be a real medicine cat apprentice," Bumblepaw explained.

"A real- what?" Heartstorm asked still extremely confused.

"I have to go to the Moonpool at half moon so I can really be excepted," Bumblepaw explained patiently. "I'll meet the others Clan's medicine cats." Heartstorm's eyes widened. Not in surprise this time. Lionbreeze... Lionbreeze was ShadowClan's medicine cat.

"Will Lionbreeze be there?" asked Heartstorm, forcing himself to be calm.

"Yeah, 'course," Bumblepaw nodded. "He's a medicine cat too."

"Don't talk to him," Heartstorm ordered firmly.

"Why? We're all medicine cats. We don't have anything to do with Clan battles," Bumblepaw replied.

"Just don't ok? We're about to fight them," Heartstorm pointed out.

"We don't know that yet. And Lionbreeze is also a medicine cat. I will be friendly with him," Bumblepaw answered firmly then sighed. "But..., I won't say more than I have to."

"You swear?" Heartstorm interrogated.

"I swear," nodded Bumblepaw.

"You will only say hello and maybe goodbye but nothing else."

"Yeah..., ok."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Bumblepaw!" came Frogleap's sharp voice. "We're going now. Do you want to miss it?" Bumblepaw's eyes widened in horror.

"Got to go," he said quickly then nodded to Silverdrop, asleep in her nest. "Tell Silverdrop I said bye and good morning. I didn't want to wake her so I woke you."

"Gee thanks," Heartstorm nodded, slightly relieved.

"Bye," Bumblepaw said.

"Bye," Heartstorm answered, trotting out of the warrior's den after his son. "Be safe. Don't do anything stupid. Take care." Bumblepaw smiled and joined Frogleap at the entrance. They slipped out of camp and Heartstorm was left alone, waiting for dawn.

Heartstorm pricked his ear and slowly got up. He spotted something

in the distance. The air was cool and a cold breeze blew. The sky was cloudy and rain was soon to come. Heartstorm watched the moor, his eyes unblinking. He listened and watched. Finally, he spotted movement and saw the shape of Frogleap and Bumblepaw. They reached the border and Heartstorm watched them from the shade of the trees as they slipped into the tunnel and reappeared. Bumblepaw looked tired but happy and Frogleap just looked grumpy. Heartstorm made sure no other Clan cat was around and rushed to meet them. Bumblepaw seemed pleasantly surprised and slightly amused. Frogleap was tired and his foot ached so he just muttered that he was going to sleep.

"How was it?" asked Heartstorm eagerly. He hoped to hear a bit about Lionbreeze.

"Great," grinned Bumblepaw. "I actually went to StarClan. I saw them! And- and I saw Sagekit." Heartstorm smiled, thinking of his smallest kit.

"Sagekit," he whispered, loving the sound of his son's name on his tongue.

"Yeah. He's doing good," Bumblepaw continued, smiling and imagining his littlest sibling.

"So you're a real medicine cat apprentice?" asked Heartstorm.

"Yup," nodded Bumblepaw. "I was scared that they wouldn't except me but they did." Bumblepaw beamed brightly. They padded slowly towards camp.

"That's great. I'm so proud of you," Heartstorm beamed and he was.

"Oh and I met Lionbreeze," Bumblepaw added. Heartstorm pricked his ear, extremely interested now. "He was nice. I mean, he said congratulations and all. But he kept apart from us. And at some point..., he came up to me, when we were making our way back and he whispered into my ear..." Heartstorm frowned.

"What did he say?" he asked. "Did he hurt you?" Heartstorm unsheathed his claws and dug them into the earth.

"No, of course not!" exclaimed Bumblepaw. "We're not warriors! We're medicine cats. We don't- we don't do that kind of things. He just told me... he said that he knew I was your son. And he said that bad things were to come."

"Those were his exact words?" Heartstorm questioned. ""I know you're Heartstorm's son and bad things are to come"?"

"No. He was like "You look exactly like Heartstorm" and then he said "Bad things will come... for you *and* your Clan." Heartstorm growled quietly. He wished he could rung through WindClan and slash Lionbreeze's throat. Lionbreeze had threatened his son and his Clan. Heartstorm suddenly felt the reality of the situation dawning on him. His son really was in danger and Lionbreeze had threatened him. Heartstorm felt like keeping Bumblepaw near him at all times and hide him away. He gulped, feeling sad and angry tears brimming at his eyes.

"Don't worry," he muttered angrily. "Lionbreeze will not go near you again." Bumblepaw frowned.

"I'm not scared. I told you, we are medicine cats, we do not hurt each other," Bumblepaw told Heartstorm gently. Heartstorm doubted that. He remembered clearly the time Lionbreeze had pounced on him. So much for medicine cats being against violence.

"Lionbreeze is capable of hurting you," Heartstorm answered back. "I will not let him."

"He was warning us," Bumblepaw replied unaffected. "Like a good medicine cat. Maybe his Clan's mad at us and he's just warning me. Medicine cat to medicine cat."

"Bumblepaw...," Heartstorm wanted to tell his son that it was quite clearly a threat but he stopped himself. He didn't want Bumblepaw to worry. It was not Bumblepaw's problem. It was Heartstorm's. "You're right. Don't worry about it." Bumblepaw gave Heartstorm a questioning look but then shrugged.

"Cool," he grinned. They had reached camp. He trotted inside and Heartstorm saw him join his sister at the apprentice den entrance. Brightpaw let Bumblepaw talk for a moment then her eyes lit up and she nuzzled him affectionately. Heartstorm's heart melted slightly. He smiled and joined Silverdrop's side. She looked at him curiously.

"How long did you wait for them to get back?" she asked.

"Not too long," shrugged Heartstorm.

"What's wrong?" Silverdrop inquired, seeing Heartstorm's face.

"Lionbreeze," Heartstorm muttered underneath his breath. "Lionbreeze threatened our son."

Ch. 35

"Yes, Heartstorm?" Reedstar asked.

"It's about Bumblepaw. And Lionbreeze," Heartstorm started. Reedstar beckoned him under the shade of a tree. He turned serious.

"Lionbreeze, from ShadowClan?" asked Reedstar, concerned.

"Yes, the very one," nodded Heartstorm. "He saw my son yesterday and he threatened him."

"How?" questioned Reedstar.

"I'm not finished," Heartstorm snapped then quickly apologised, "sorry, I mean, let me finish." Reedstar nodded for him to continue.

"He told Bumblepaw he looked exactly like me. Then he said bad things were to come to him and RiverClan," Heartstorm finished.

"Mmmm," Reedstar said, frowning deeply then sighed. "Look, I know you might think that is bad but isn't Lionbreeze a medicine cat? He warns other cats. He was just warning about something bad happening... I wonder what it is... maybe it is the battle ThunderClan and RiverClan will fight against ShadowClan...."

"So it's final? We will join ThunderClan and fight?"

"We are not joining ThunderClan, merely making an alliance. And yes, it is final."

"Right but... look I know Lionbreeze. *Knew*. But that's beside the point, I know that he's not the kind of medicine cat to kindly warn another Clan. He was threatening us. And Bumblepaw."

"Heartstorm... maybe you didn't really *know* him. Apparently he's the one that told on you? Maybe that's why you don't really *like* him."

"No! Reedstar! I assure you! It's not because of that. We used to be best friends-"

"Yes and when he betrayed you, you hated him. I can't take what a medicine cat said to us as a threat." Heartstorm wanted to yowl and yell at Reedstar to trust him, to see the facts.

"But Reedstar-"

"Heartstorm... I've got things to attend to. I know you're worried about your son. But he is a medicine cat apprentice. He will not be involved in any fighting. I will make sure no harm comes to him."

"Thank you Reedstar..., but wait! Lionbreeze also said "you look exactly like Heartstorm". That is totally a threat."

"That is an observation," Reedstar said, looking at Heartstorm with raised eyebrows. "And it us a true observation."

"Please Reedstar, please believe me," begged Heartstorm.

"Heartstorm... I know you're worried about your kits. I'd be worried about Deerflame as well. But there is nothing to fear. Bumblepaw is no harm's way," Reedstar assured Heartstorm. "I assure you that. If he is, I will protect him. The Clan will protect him. RiverClan protects its own." Heartstorm sighed and dipped his head. He nodded solemnly.

"Ok. Thanks," he murmured. Reedstar smiled assuringly then padded off to his deputy. Heartstorm trotted to Silverdrop who was talking to Eelfrost some way away. She looked in his direction and flicked her tail.

"How did it go?" she asked. Eelfrost pricked his ears curiously.

"What did you tell Reedstar?" he asked.

"It didn't go well," sighed Heartstorm. Silverdrop looked sadly at him and ran her tail on his back softly.

"What didn't go well?" asked Eelfrost.

"I don't- I don't want to talk about it," Heartstorm brushed Silverdrop off and padded away. "Just, leave me alone please. I need to be alone for a while." Silverdrop understood this and nodded without any questions. She needed to be alone to as well sometimes. Eelfrost watched, a confused frown on his face as he thought about all the possibilities of what could have happened. Heartstorm ducked out of camp. He needed some time to breath in fresh air and walk alone with his thoughts. He padded through the forest calmly, admiring the beauty of RiverClan. Then he thought about Bumblepaw. His thoughts flickered to Silverdrop's dream. The dreams that she had everynight. About Bumblepaw..., fighting Blizzardkit. Something occurred to Heartstorm. Blizzardkit would be an apprentice soon probably. He didn't understand. He didn't know if Silverdrop's dreams were true. He didn't know how Blizzardkit could possibly kill Bumblepaw. But he would do anything so that there would never be a chance for that to come true. He thought about the upcoming battle with ThunderClan. He knew that Bumblepaw would not be in the fighting. But he would be there, healing other cats, side by side with Frogleap. Then there was Brightpaw. She would definitely be enthusiastic. She'd jump right into battle. She had barely had more than a moon of training, but already, Eelfrost was telling Heartstorm how good she was at fighting. He hoped that that didn't mean that she had to go into battle. He wanted her to stay at camp, safe, with her brother. He knew that she would be against it. She was a strong minded apprentice. He took a deep breath to clear his mind. His head seemed clouded and it gave him a throbbing headache. Suddenly, there was a crunch. Heartstorm spun around. Deerflame appeared from behind a tree.

"What's up?" she asked, looking concerned.

"N-nothing," Heartstorm repeated quickly, slightly surprised he hadn't heard her.

"Don't say that. You're so distracted. You didn't even hear

me and I literally stomped behind you," Deerflame pointed out. She trotted to Heartstorm's side. He wanted to tell her to go away. That he wanted to be alone. That he didn't want to talk. But he realised maybe talking wasn't so bad. Deerflame was his best friend.

"It's just... ShadowClan," Heartstorm told her. Deerflame's eyes turned worried.

"Yeah...," muttered Deerflame. "ShadowClan...."

"I don't want Brightpaw or Bumblepaw to get hurt," Heartstorm said. "I don't want them to go to battle." Deerflame nodded understandingly. She urged him to continue. "I don't want Silverdrop to get hurt. I don't want to fight ShadowClan. I hate them. I really do. I mean, I get it that they chased me out. But they didn't have to be like this. It was over. When they chased me out it was over. They should just get on. Live their life."

"Yeah, but they're angry," Deerflame said. "They're angry that one of their best apprentices, their best warriors left and has now joined RiverClan. Their rival. Their enemy."

"What did they think I was going to do?" exclaimed Heartstorm.

"They didn't think. They thought they'd punish you and that they would never see you again. But you joined their rival instead. And you're happy now. They definitely did not want that," Deerflame continued. Heartstorm wasn't exactly feeling more encouraged but that but he liked that Deerflame was being realistic.

"Yeah, they're just revengeful mousebrained dung," spat Heartstorm.

"Don't underestimate them," Deerflame said, laughing.

"I won't. Cinderstar used to tell me that," Heartstorm told Deerflame. "And she's right."

"Wonder if she's in StarClan or the Dark Forest," muttered Deerflame under his breath.

"I don't think the Dark Forest would want her. And she isn't good enough for StarClan," Heartstorm shrugged. He didn't care. Cinderstar was the past. He'd try not to dwell on that. Wherever Cinderstar was, he was sure she was going to harm his kits. That's what mattered most.

Ch. 36

Heartstorm trotted beside Eelfrost. Brightpaw trotted in front of them, head held high and tail twitching happily.

"She's really good at fighting," Eelfrost told Heartstorm proudly. "You'll see for yourself." Eelfrost had suggested that Heartstorm came to training as Eelfrost wanted to train Brightpaw to fight two opponents. They reached the clearing and Brightpaw started running laps without Eelfrost saying anything. Heartstorm was impressed and slightly nervous. He hadn't fought for a long time and he suddenly felt as if he might mess everything up in front of his daughter.

"Hey, why so jittery?" asked Eelfrost.

"Nah, it's nothing," shrugged Heartstorm. When Brightpaw had finished running for laps, she trotted up to them.

"Let's start with what we've already learnt," Eelfrost said. Brightpaw nodded. "Back kick first." Eelfrost stood in front of Brightpaw, shuffling side ways. Suddenly, Brightpaw lashed out. In an explosive quick movement, Brightpaw's back legs swept from under her feet and knocked into Eelfrost. She put her weight on her front paws. Eelfrost stumbled back, grinning broadly. Brightpaw regained balance quickly. Heartstorm was impressed and extremely proud.

"Again," announced Eelfrost. Brightpaw did it again and again till she could do it with her eyes closed. "Now the belly rake." Eelfrost shuffled towards Brightpaw and she leapt to his side before sliding underneath his stomach, raking her sheathed claws on her underbelly. Heartstorm nodded, extremely proud.

"Leap and hold now," Eelfrost ordered. Brightpaw executed the move perfectly. "Right, we're warmed up. Let's get into a real fight. I want you to use everything I've taught you. Remember, judge your opponent's strength, balance, flexibility, speed and

where they are. If they are facing you, sideways, on their back, stomach or if they have their back against you. All these things are important, these signs will tell you which move will be best to use. Understood?"

"Yes," nodded Brightpaw confidently. Eelfrost nodded and flicked his tail, signalling the start. Heartstorm watched as Brightpaw and Eelfrost crouched in front of each other. Heartstorm hadn't realised how good Eelfrost was at fighting as well. He was even more glad that Eelfrost was Brightpaw's mentor. Suddenly, Brightpaw lashed out, going for a front paw blow. Eelfrost dodged and rammed into her. She fell to the ground but rolled over with Eelfrost. She was now on top of him. She clawed at his stomach. He pushed her off. She stumbled back but regained balance quickly. She lashed out with an explosive back kick. Eelfrost was thrown off balance and she used this. She leapt onto his back and he collapsed to the ground. He was bigger and stronger so she could not pin him down. Instead, she grabbed his scruff and shook. He pushed her away but she did not back off. As he staggered up, she swiped out her front paw and he stumbled back. Eelfrost looked dazed but suddenly, he leapt to the side then caught Brightpaw's scruff in his mouth. He was stronger and held on. She wriggled, trying to get out.

"Remember what I said. Wriggling will not help," Eelfrost told her through clenched teeth. Brightpaw stopped a moment, thinking. Then she let herself fall to the ground. In a swift moment, she then brought out her right paw and hit Eelfrost hard in the stomach. He wavered slightly but held her scruff in his mouth. Then she twisted around and bit Eelfrost on the neck. This time, he leapt back.

"Good job," he said, breathing heavily. "That's how you do it." Brightpaw smiled then swiped at Eelfrost's foot to unbalance him. He dodged quickly and hit her on the stomach. She twisted around in time to catch his tail in her mouth. Eelfrost let out a growl and leapt at her. They rolled to the ground until Brightpaw finally managed to break free and get hold of Eelfrost's scruff. She shook it hard then let go. Eelfrost rolled to his feet, panting.

"Nice," he congratulated. "Better than yesterday." Brightpaw

beamed, happy for the compliment.

"Thanks," she said.

"That was great Brightpaw. I'm not going to worry about you in battle," Heartstorm told his daughter proudly.

"That's what I'm training her for. So nobody has to worry about her getting hurt," nodded Eelfrost. "Right, take a break, that was very good. We'll come back and start on the basics of fighting two opponents at once." Brightpaw nodded enthusiastically and quickly trotted off to the river to drink some water.

"You're a great mentor," gushed Heartstorm. "You've taught her so much."

"She's an incredibly fast learner," Eelfrost shrugged. "I'm doing my best."

"You're best is great," Heartstorm assured Eelfrost. A few minutes later, Brightpaw came trotting back, ready for another lesson.

"Alright, sometimes, you're going to find yourself facing two enemies at the same time," Eelfrost told Brightpaw seriously. "I did not learn much about this kind of fighting till the last moon of my apprenticeship. I would have loved to have more training on it though because I think it's very important. So that's why we're starting with it early." Brightpaw nodded.

"We'll start easy because fighting two cats at the same time is *very* different," continued Eelfrost. "We will start with the scenario where you are fighting one cat and another one of his or her Clanmate comes along to help. Firstly, in battle, you must always be aware of your surroundings. You must be able to see, even when you're fighting somebody, what is going on around you. You do not want anybody creeping up on you. We are going to do fights where another cat will creep up on you, but not now. First I want to teach you how to defend yourself if two cats come at you." Eelfrost nodded for Heartstorm to stand beside him, facing Brightpaw. "If we are both standing here, in front of you, it is the easiest way to

deal with us. You have to be able to distract one of us long enough for you to take the other one down before anything happens. Understood? If you were in this position, what would you do?" Brightpaw thought a moment then took a deep breath. Eelfrost crouched and Heartstorm did the same, fixing his eyes on Brightpaw. He found himself knowing exactly what kind of moves he would do if Brightpaw really were an enemy. Brightpaw suddenly lashed out her right paw into Heartstorm's face. He was blinded and surprised. He staggered away. He shook himself quickly and leapt back to the fight to see Brightpaw clawing at Eelfrost's belly. She turned to him and charged at him. She leapt at him but he dodged. She rolled to the ground and jumped to her feet.

"very good!" congratulated Eelfrost. "You distracted Heartstorm, got rid of me then got back to Heartstorm. Of course, it won't be as easy in real battle. For example, Heartstorm you should have seen your face! Ha! Next time, your enemy won't be as surprised and as quickly dazed." Heartstorm huffed but Brightpaw nodded enthusiastically.

"This is what you must do... " Eelfrost explained. The whole afternoon, Heartstorm helped Eelfrost with training. When Heartstorm returned back to camp, he almost felt like an apprentice himself. He was slightly aching but it felt good. He realised that fighting had made him feel more alive. He took a deep breath of fresh air, flexing his claws. He shook his head, feeling the soreness spread through his shoulders. It felt good.

"Hey Heartstorm!" came a voice. It was Sparkbelly. He was healthy again and just as optimistic as before.

"Hi Sparkbelly," smiled Heartstorm. "Making any advanced on Rosebriar?"

"Nothing so far," sighed Sparkbelly. "I think she's more into Hawkflight. he's younger. Oh well." Sparkbelly shrugged. "I think if I'm going to lead a lone life forever, I might as well make the best of it." Heartstorm furrowed his eyebrows.

"Don't say that," Heartstorm said lightly.

"Don't worry, I don't mean it in a bad way. I think I'll be fine, alone," shrugged Sparkbelly. "I have the Clan. Do you miss them?"

"Who?" asked Heartstorm as they walked together.

"Well Crowkit and Lilykit of course," exclaimed Sparkbelly. The WindClan kits had not been on Heartstorm's mind for a long time.

"Oh...," he said, thinking back to the cute kits. He knew they were meant to be in WindClan. "Well, I guess. They were nice kits. But we were never going to be with them forever."

"Yeah... well, they were there during the whole time I was in the medicine den," Sparkbelly said. "so I did grow attached. Ravenfall was nice too."

"He was," shrugged Heartstorm. "But he had to be. We took him in."

"Yeah. Well I got to know him. He's really fun," Sparkbelly said. "Anyways, I didn't want to talk to you about that. I wanted to talk to you about your kits."

"My kits? What about them?" asked Heartstorm.

"I don't know, what about them?" Sparkbelly said, looking at Heartstorm expectantly. "Tell me about them."

"Oh," Heartstorm said, nodding. "Well, I just trained with Brightpaw. I'm so proud of her. She was great. I've never- I don't know if I'm being biased but she's like the best apprentice ever. She's so good at fighting. Swift, strong and smart. Honestly, if I went into battle with her, I'd be more afraid for the cats going against her."

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Dusk had arrived. The sky was a beautiful greyish pink colours. Birds had stopped singing and were replaced by the hoots of owls. Heartstorm stood by the river, gazing at it calmly. The air was cold but it felt good after a strangely hot day. He breathed slowly, liking the calm and enjoying the stillness. Most of the camp was settling into their nests or whispering amongst themselves about their tiring day. Suddenly, there was a rustle behind Heartstorm. He knew exactly who it was and smiled a little. Bumblepaw stood next to Heartstorm, staring into the gently flowing water.

"It's very calming, isn't it?" Bumblepaw said finally, breaking the silence.

"It is," nodded Heartstorm.

"I come here often before going to sleep," Bumblepaw continued. Heartstorm hadn't known that.

"Really, why? Do you have trouble sleeping?" Heartstorm asked worriedly.

"No," said Bumblepaw. "Of course not... I like it here. At night it's really nice."

"how's training treating you?" asked Heartstorm.

"Great. I've learnt loads," explained Bumblepaw.

"Are you..., liking it?" asked Heartstorm.

"Yes of course," nodded Bumblepaw. "I learnt about alder bark and burdock root." Heartstorm didn't find anything interesting in that but he was glad his son enjoyed what he was doing. He nodded, smiling encouragingly to his son.

"That's- cool...," Heartstorm nodded.

"It's ok.. I get it if you don't understand what I'm saying. I'm just glad that you understand what I want," shrugged Bumblepaw. "I mean, Brightpaw even told me she didn't understand anything I told her but she still listens. I should go to sleep now... I've got a long day ahead."

"Yeah of course. Good night," nodded Heartstorm.

"Good night," Bumblepaw replied and padded away softly. Heartstorm watched until Bumblepaw was lost from sight. He turned back his attention to the stream. The clearing had gone silent now, every cat was settling down in their nests. Heartstorm listened to the water trickle by, letting it calm him. Without realising, the moon had risen and Heartstorm still stood by the stream. He spotted the reflection of the moon and himself in the water. The stream was still now, not a ripple. Heartstorm stared at the reflection of his face. It looked so smooth. Suddenly, there was a small ripple. Heartstorm's reflection distorted and the moon's reflection seemed to float away. When the water stilled once more, Heartstorm realised he was not alone. There, standing beside him, staring into the water was a tortoiseshell cat. She was beautiful with gentle eyes. Heartstorm turned around, his voice lost. Shimmering, like a ghost, stood Brightheart.

"B-Brightheart," stuttered Heartstorm. He hadn't seen her for a long time. And he had definitely never seen her in his world... In RiverClan...

"Hello Heartstorm," smiled Brightheart, her smile seemed to illuminate the night.

"H-how?" stammered Heartstorm.

"I wouldn't be asking *how*," Brightheart said. "I'd ask *why*."

"Why?" repeated Heartstorm. He flicked his eyes around him, looking around for another cat he might have missed. He half hoped Sagekit was there. But Sagekit was nowhere to be seen.

"I need to warn you," Brightheart said. Heartstorm's mind started whirling. What had happened? What would happen? "I don't

want you to start getting all worried." Brightheart spoke to Heartstorm gently. It calmed him slightly but he still couldn't help but worry.

"What's wrong? what happened?" Heartstorm asked.

"I've come to warn you about the war arriving," Brightheart recited. "There is no stopping it. But there is now way you must blame yourself for whatever happens." Heartstorm frowned.

"Blame myself?" he said softly. "What war...?" He thought about his kits and Silverdrop. About Deerflame and Eelfrost. About Blacktail and Thornstar. "Are- are we going to lose? Am I not going to be there? Are my kits... my mate... my friends... are they going to die?" Brightheart looked at Heartstorm pitifully.

"Heartstorm, I cannot tell you that," Brightheart said gently. "Heartstorm. You must not blame yourself. Whatever happens, it is not your fault. Remember my words."

"Brightheart, what?" Heartstorm exclaimed, angry and confused. "You came down here... all the way down here to tell me there is a war coming? And that I must not blame myself for it? How can- what- why? I don't know what's going to happen... but I can prevent it. You know a war is coming. I can tell Reedstar. I can tell the Clan. I can prepare them..."

"Heartstorm, the war is coming. Nothing will change that," Brightheart replied.

"I can warn the Clan. Like you're warning me. If I don't tell them and the war does come, of course I'm going to blame myself!" exclaimed Heartstorm. Brightheart sighed.

"Heartstorm... you won't understand my words till- till it happens. So please, stop worrying about. Just prepare yourselves. Prepare my daughter in law. Protect and prepare my grandkits. Ok?" Brightheart said finally.

"I er- I don't understand," sputtered Heartstorm.

"I don't expect you to. I just want you to remember my words, ok?" Brightheart asked gently. Heartstorm frowned. His stomach felt queasy.

"You're not making sense," Heartstorm said angrily. "Why are you telling me this? Why?"

"I don't know if I'll be able to come... later," Brightheart answered.

"W-what do you mean?" murmured Heartstorm, not knowing what to feel.

"I love you," whispered Brightheart. Her voice gently touched Heartstorm's ears. He watched as his mother's form became brighter and brighter. He watched as the stream glittered. Brightheart's shape became a bright light. Heartstorm narrowed his eyes, trying to make out Brightheart. The light suddenly burned extremely bright. Heartstorm took a step back. Then, just as suddenly as she had come, Brightheart was gone. The light disappeared in a flash and Heartstorm was left staring an empty space in front of him. He shook his head and blinked twice. He stared into the stream. It was calm once more. The moon was reflected in the stream once again. Heartstorm found himself breathing heavily. He sighed and pushed through some bushes. He made his way towards the warrior's den. An owl screeched. Heartstorm heard some fluttering then a faint squeak. He looked up and saw and owl glide past the moon. It hooted in victory. It's wings were large and majestic. In it's large claws, a small figure wriggled. Heartstorm slipped into the warrior's den and spotted Silverdrop's form in the gloom. He imagined not seeing her there. Sadness prickled through him. His eyes were salty. He pushed away his thoughts and curled into his nest. Although he tried not to think, the thoughts came relentlessly through the whole night.

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There was some loud commotion at the camp entrance. Heartstorm blinked his tired eyes open. He slowly got up. The warrior den was empty. He looked automatically at Silverdrop's nest. It was empty as well. He trotted out of the den. The sun had just risen. Cats were milling by the camp entrance. Heartstorm sniffed and wrinkled his nose. The strong smell of ThunderClan had reached his nose. He wondered what it was. Heartstorm saw Blacktail push through the crowd. Then there was a sharp shout.

"Everybody get back!" Reedstar's voice was strong and firm. The cats parted and Heartstorm was able to peer through and see Falconstar, Waspnose, Snowfur and Palebird.

"What's going on?" muttered Moorpelt, beside Heartstorm.

"I don't know... I just woke up....," shrugged Heartstorm confused and curious as well.

"What do they want?" Heartstorm heard a cat growl.

"Why are they here?" snapped another.

"They shouldn't be here," Moorpelt growled under his breath. Heartstorm pushed through the crowd and watched as Reedstar dipped his head to Falconstar. They both greeted each other gravely. Then Reedstar turned to RiverClan.

"RiverClan, we will welcome ThunderClan. We are now alliances," declared Reedstar. Hearstorm frowned and looked around for Silverdrop. He came face to face with Eelfrost.

"Do you know what's going on?" asked Eelfrost. "Why did they let ThunderClan in?"

"It's about the battle," Heartstorm found himself knowing the

answer perfectly. "they're here for the battle against ShadowClan. Of course!"

"right... nobody said it would mean that ThunderClan had to come into RiverClan," muttered Eelfrost, lashing his tail from side to side thoughtfully.

"Of course it means that. Maybe even that we will have to go to ThunderClan," Heartstorm thought aloud.

"Today, Falconstar, Snowfur, Palebird and Waspnose are here to talk to Blacktail, Frogleap and I about our upcoming decision to fight ShadowClan," continued Reedstar. His eyes landed on each and every one of his Clanmates. When his eyes locked with Heartstorm, he gave him a meaningful look. Heartstorm snorted. They didn't need to fight ShadowClan.

"We want to be left alone," added Falconstar, eyeing the Clan judgingly. "So nobody is to disturb us. Palebird will stay outside the den, stopping anybody from going in." There were a few nods and a few mutters and angry growls.

"And I will put... Heartstorm outside of the den as well," Reedstar added. Heartstorm didn't care. Eelfrost looked at him in surprise.

"Lucky, you get to be a guard and fend off eavesdroppers. But you have to stand next to a RiverClan cat," Eelfrost told Heartstorm. Heartstorm shrugged. He didn't care that he had been chosen. All he cared about was stopping the war arriving. About talking to his kits... to Silverdrop.

"Silverdrop!" he called as the crowd dispersed. Silverdrop turned around and smiled. Her smile made Heartstorm's heart jump a little.

"Morning Heartstorm. How did you sleep? You came in late, last night," Silverdrop said, her voice soft and comforting.

"Yeah- I have to tell you something," Heartstorm told her.

"Heartstorm!" Reedstar called. Heartstorm turned around to

see Reedstar looking impatient.

"You better go," urged Silverdrop. "Tell me later." Heartstorm gave a brief nod and trotted towards Reedstar.

"I need you to guard the den," Reedstar told Heartstorm. "And you'll be able to hear what's going on inside. And... keep an eye on Palebird."

"Um sure ok," nodded Heartstorm.

"thank you," nodded Reedstar. Heartstorm wondered why Reedstar wanted him to hear what was going on. "And I don't want others to know about what happens in there. So don't tell anybody." Heartstorm nodded once again, now understanding. He trotted after Reedstar towards his den. Palebird sat by the entrance already, looking suspiciously at all the passing cats. Heartstorm joined Palebird's side, nodding. Reedstar slipped into the den.

"Mmmm, RiverClan camp is very... quaint," commented Palebird. Heartstorm had other things on his mind. Like the encounter of the night before. He didn't answer Palebird, he didn't even glance at him.

"Very... small and... delicate," continued Palebird. Heartstorm didn't react. "What, do you not know how to talk, ShadowClan?" Heartstorm snapped his head in Palebird's direction.

"What did you say?" he said softly.

"Oh sorry, are your delicate ears incapable of hearing the word ShadowClan, ShadowClan cat?" Palebird asked poshly. Heartstorm growled but he knew Palebird was just trying to rile him up. He bit his tongue and closed his mouth. He turned his attention back to watching life around camp.

"Aww, is little Heartstorm pouting?" taunted Palebird. Heartstorm pretended not to hear. He looked around the clearing. He thought about Brightheart. He wished he hadn't shouted at her. He hoped he'd be able to see her again. He felt a pang of sadness at the thought of not seeing her again. He didn't know what she had

meant when she had said she might not be able to come back... He knew there was a war coming. How was he to warn his Clan? How was he going to protect his family, his friends, his Clan? If he told Reedstar, Reedstar would just laugh at him. He'd say that of course war was coming. That was why Falconstar had come to RiverClan, wasn't it? Heartstorm sighed, realising that Palebird had moved away slightly. He looked up and spotted Palebird staring intently at Silverdrop.

"What are you staring at?" snapped Heartstorm. Palebird cocked his head, eyes locked on Silverdrop. Silverdrop sat next to a tree. The shade covered half of her face. Her eyes were lit up by the sun. She looked dazzling, more beautiful than ever.

"That she-cat," Palebird nodded to Heartstorm. "What's her name?"

"Why do you want to know?" Heartstorm snapped, his eyes narrowing. He suddenly felt a sharp emotion like anger, bubbling through him. He knew exactly what it was. He hadn't felt it like this before.

"Hmm, well, wouldn't anybody want to know?" chuckled Palebird. "She's magnificent."

"Well back off!" snarled Heartstorm, baring his fangs and lashing his tail. He felt the red hot anger.. and jealousy, pulsing through him.

"Woah, chill. Don't you think she's pretty? We can talk about her together. What do you reckon her kits would look like?" Palebird said cooly, his eyes still on Silverdrop. Heartstorm growled and lashed out his front paw. He made sure it was sheathed. He hit Palebird hard on the shoulder. Palebird stumbled back and looked at Heartstorm, frustrated and annoyed. Silverdrop frowned in their direction then caught Heartstorm's eye. She gave him a confused look. He flicked his tail, telling her to go. She shrugged and quickly trotted off. Palebird spun around, trying to glimpse Silverdrop once more but she was gone. He cursed.

"What was that for?" he growled angrily at Heartstorm,

advancing slowly. "You think you can hit me like that?" Heartstorm spat in his face. He had never thought of other cats calling Silverdrop pretty. He realised, it was obvious, Silverdrop was the prettiest cat he had ever seen.

"Don't you dare ever look at her again," snarled Heartstorm.

"What's your problem?" retorted Palebird, his eyes furious.

"She's mine!" snapped Heartstorm. Palebird raised an eyebrow and grinned maliciously.

"Oohh, little ShadowClan cat has a crush on the prettiest cat in the Clan," jeered Palebird. "You wish you could be with her."

"She's my mate!" hissed Heartstorm. Palebird stopped in his tracks a moment, looking stunned but then broke into a big smile.

"Ha, in your dreams!" he laughed. Heartstorm growled, crouching low. It took all his self control not to launch himself at Palebird.

"She's my mate and you're not going to talk about her like that again," spat Heartstorm firmly, he held Palebird's gaze. He felt something pulsing through him, hot and strong. Palebird raised his eyebrows.

"Chill out," Palebird said, frowning. "Just chill."

"Don't you dare talk about her like that again," growled Heartstorm.

"Ok ok ok. Whatever," Palebird said. "Soooo.... she's actually your mate?" Heartstorm lashed his tail and sat down fuming.

"Yes," he answered.

"I did not know that," Palebird tutted. "So do you have kits?"

"It's none of your business," retorted Heartstorm. Just then

Bumblepaw came trotting past them with herbs clutched in his mouth. His tail was held high and he caught Heartstorm's eye. He smiled through clenched jaws and slipped under a bush towards the elder's den. Palebird grinned.

"That's one of your kits, isn't it?" he said. "I mean, you look exactly the same." Heartstorm didn't answer. "So he's a medicine cat apprentice.."

"Yes he is. And he's going to be the best," nodded Heartstorm angrily.

"I never said he wasn't going to be," Palebird said calmly. Heartstorm sighed. He felt uptight and stressed. He had many things on his mind and Palebird had made him angry so easily. He felt slightly bad now.

"Yeah well. Whatever. Can we just stop talking?" Heartstorm said, although it wasn't a question. Palebird shrugged. Heartstorm heard the voices of cats inside the den. He hadn't realised that they'd been talking all along. He heard Falconstar saying something and Frogleap interrupting. There were a few shushes and a few angry retorts. Then there was more talking. Heartstorm didn't bother listening. He didn't care what they were saying. Whatever Reedstar was planning, he'd tell the Clan. Heartstorm would be there to hear it when that time came. Palebird sat, looking around in silence. He stretched his ear, trying to listen.

"Can you hear something?" asked Palebird, nodding to the den. Heartstorm shrugged.

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"Aren't you curious?" asked Palebird.

"Can you shut up?" Heartstorm retorted.

"Somebody's in a bad mood," Palebird grinned. Heartstorm rolled his eyes. Palebird had been the one being extremely annoying and rude in the beginning anyways. He turned away from Palebird. After a long time, Reedstar emerged from the den.

"It is time to tell the Clan," he declared.

"What?" asked Heartstorm. Reedstar raised an eyebrow.

"You weren't listening," he stated.

"No," agreed Heartstorm, he shrugged. "I'll listen to whatever the Clan gets to hear." Reedstar nodded and padded towards the High Rock. He called a Clan Gathering. Heartstorm watched as Falconstar joined Reedstar at the top with Blacktail and Waspnose. Frogleap and Snowfur stood together at the High Rock's side. Palebird padded to Snowfur's side and whispered something in his ear. Heartstorm turned around and trotted towards Silverdrop. She flicked her tail at him.

"What's wrong?" she asked him worriedly.

"Brightheart came down here, last night," Heartstorm told her. Silverdrop looked surprised then concerned once more.

"What did she say?" she asked carefully.

"That I shouldn't *blame* myself for whatever happens... She said a war was coming," Heartstorm told Silverdrop. Silverdrop's forehead creased. "And she said I shouldn't blame myself."

"A war *is* coming," Silverdrop nodded. "We already knew that. That's what Reedstar is coming to tell us today."

"I know... but there must be something we can do to stop it," Heartstorm sighed.

"No Heartstorm, sometimes there's nothing you can do," Silverdrop said gently.

"But Silverdrop," Heartstorm argued.

"Don't blame yourself for this. We just need to prepare ourselves the best we can. And our kits," Silverdrop told Heartstorm. Heartstorm hung his head. He didn't understand what Brightheart had meant. Everything she had said was useless.

"RiverClan, today I have come to tell you that we will be fighting alongside ThunderClan. We will fight ShadowClan a quarter moon before leaf-bare," Reedstar declared. Heartstorm felt chills run through him. Leaf-bare was in a long time, but somehow it felt closer. Cats started to shuffle on their feet, whispering amongst themselves. Silverdrop sat quietly, thinking. Suddenly, Cinderstar's words came into Heartstorm's mind. He remembered her telling him that ShadowClan was going to attack the first full moon of green-leaf. Was Reedstar really going to disregard that? Heartstorm huffed. He was getting frustrated. He swivelled around and marched out of camp, feeling disorientated.

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"From now on," went on Reedstar, "everybody will be training daily. We must be on form when fighting ShadowClan. We will go to ThunderClan to train with them every so often and they will come here to train with us." It was early morning and Heartstorm had finally excepted the fact that they were going into battle. He knew that if that was going to happen, he needed to prepare himself, his mate and his kits. Brightpaw came trotting towards him.

"I can't believe it!" exclaimed Brightpaw, rolling her eyes.

"I know..., fighting shouldn't be the answer to everything," sighed Heartstorm, glad that his kits understood.

"No.., I meant, I can't believe we have to be fighting *with* ThunderClan. Like, we're not weak. We should just go straight for ShadowClan," Brightpaw clarified. Heartstorm frowned.

"Brightpaw, I don't want you going out to battle," he told her.

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed. "This is what I'm training for!"

"I know, but you're not fully trained," Heartstorm told her firmly.

"I will be!" exclaimed Brightpaw. "I'll probably be a warrior by then."

"I don't want you to get hurt, ok?" Heartstorm told her gently.

"You can't stop me from going," Brightpaw said firmly then softened. "I know you're scared for me but I'm training the best I can. Eelfrost is really pushing me. I know I can do it. This is what I want, to protect and fight for my Clan, even if it means dying. Isn't that what you swear, when you become warrior? That you'll defend

your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Heartstorm nodded slowly, thoughtfully. He was proud that Brightpaw would do anything for his Clan but he didn't want her getting hurt. He just wanted to keep her safe forever.

"Yeah, that is what I swore. What we all swore," he agreed.

"Great, I've got to go. See you later," Brightpaw said quickly, spotting Eelfrost at the camp entrance. She rushed away. Heartstorm watched her go. Her eyes were bright and enthusiastic. He knew there was no stopping her. Sparkbelly trotted towards Heartstorm.

"Hey, you're looking down," commented Sparkbelly.

"Huh?" Heartstorm said, snapping out of his thoughts. "What-oh no, it's nothing."

"Well then, do you want to train together?" asked Sparkbelly. Heartstorm liked the idea of training. He wanted to stretch, feel the adrenaline pumping through him. When he fought, his mind didn't dwell on anything but the present.

"Sure," nodded Heartstorm. Together, they trotted out of camp. They reached a small place near the river and Heartstorm stretched. He shook his head and dipped half of his face in the river to feel more awake. Sparkbelly trotted around, stretched, ran and rolled around, warming up. Heartstorm suddenly felt much more awake and to attention. His senses went sharp and he felt his muscles stiffen.

"Ready?" asked Sparkbelly. "How should we do this?"

"Let's just count three two one and see how it goes," suggested Heartstorm.

"Alright," agreed Sparkbelly. "Three... two... one...." Sparkbelly lunged forward without warning. His front paws reached out. Heartstorm saw the movement and swiftly stepped aside, turning around quickly. Heartstorm lashed out his front paw. It hit Sparkbelly in the stomach. Without waiting, Heartstorm drove

forward and tumbled into Sparkbelly. Sparkbelly twisted and bit Heartstorm on the side. Heartstorm pushed him away and went for a back kick. He thought he would be rusty but as his feet left the ground, he found himself dong everything by heart. He swiftly knocked into Sparkbelly who stumbled back. Then he quickly pushed Sparkbelly down in another swift motion. He gripped onto Sparkbelly's scruff and started scratching at Sparkbelly's stomach, claws sheathed. Sparkbelly struggled. Heartstorm held on as hard as he could. Sparkbelly was extremely strong and if Heartstorm let go for a second, he would be able to pin Heartstorm down. Suddenly, with a burst of strength, Sparkbelly twisted around and bit into Heartstorm's paw. Heartstorm was surprised and stopped for a split second. It was enough, Sparkbelly was on top of him. Now Heartstorm hit the ground with a thud. He felt his breath fly out of his mouth and lay winded for a while. Sparkbelly held him down, biting him on the neck. Heartstorm tried to break free but couldn't. Sparkbelly was strong and wasn't going to let go. Heartstorm's muscles burned and he was breathing hard. But he wasn't going to give up. This was something he needed. Heartstorm let himself go limp. Sparkbelly, thinking Heartstorm was giving up, let go slightly. Heartstorm knew there was no better chance. He leapt up and threw his paws around Sparkbelly's shoulders and neck. Sparkbelly fell to his knees and Heartstorm bit into the back of Sparkbelly's neck. Sparkbelly flailed his paws around wildly, catching Heartstorm in the sides a few times. Heartstorm struggled to keep Sparkbelly down but managed for a while longer until Sparkbelly suddenly stood up, holding Heartstorm's weight and rolled down. Heartstorm saw the world blur and felt the ground beneath him. He was about to be pinned down once more. He curled himself and made sure he kept rolling. Then he felt his feet touch the ground and he got up quickly. Dazed, he looked around for Sparkbelly. Suddenly, Sparkbelly went for an explosive back kick. Heartstorm staggered back as it hit him. He shook his head and reared up, bringing both of his front paws down on Sparkbelly's head. He swiped his front paw towards Sparkbelly's head again but Sparkbelly jolted back. Heartstorm then lashed out his left paw. Sparkbelly wasn't quick enough this time, it caught him near the ear. He crouched and leapt. Heartstorm side stepped away and caught Sparkbelly's tail in his mouth. Sparkbelly swivelled around, his movements restricted as Heartstorm held his tail. Sparkbelly

grabbed Heartstorm's front paws and tugged. Heartstorm let go of Sparkbelly's tail and regained balance. They circled each other, panting hard. Heartstorm's eyes locked with Sparkbelly. Sparkbelly jumped high. Heartstorm crouched down quickly and twisted around. He managed to claw Sparkbelly's underbelly with his sheathed claws. But Sparkbelly had been ready for it and before landing, he twisted. Heartstorm was still getting up and turning and Sparkbelly barged into him. Heartstorm was knocked to the ground. The two Clanmates were caught in a frenzy of rolling about in the first. Heartstorm couldn't see anything right. Everything was a blur. He could only see Sparkbelly and his flamey orange pelt. He bit into everything red, clawed at everything and kept rolling to make sure he never ended up pinned. Sparkbelly did they same. They were both two cats rolling on the ground, each one trying to get up and pin the other one down. Finally, Sparkbelly managed to get up. Heartstorm, on his back, pushed Sparkbelly away but Sparkbelly was on his feet and managed to hold Heartstorm down before he managed to get up. Heartstorm struggled wildly. Then he let himself relax. He then threw his back legs underneath Sparkbelly's stomach and rolled to his feet. Sparkbelly and Heartstorm stood facing each other, breathing hard.

"Good one," grinned Sparkbelly, shaking himself.

"Ahhh," said Heartstorm relieved, stretching himself. "That was great."

"I know, haven't felt so alive for a long time," agreed Sparkbelly.

"Now I'm starving," Heartstorm said as his stomach grumbled.

"I know me too!" exclaimed Sparkbelly. "Let's hunt."

Ch. 40

Heartstorm stood with a group of cats at the camp entrance. Finally Reedstar emerged followed by Blacktail. He flicked his tail.

"Sorry for the delay," he said. "Let's go." Together, the group of cats made their way towards the ThunderClan border. Silverdrop pressed close to Heartstorm.

"Do you think they'll give us a warm greeting?" she whispered.

"About as warm as we did," Heartstorm muttered. Finally, they reached the ThunderClan border. Waiting for them was Waspnose and Palebird. They greeted the RiverClan cats solemnly.

"This way," Waspnose said. Heartstorm almost couldn't believe it as they slipped into the tunnel and emerged into ThunderClan. They padded towards the forest without a word. Heartstorm felt chills run through his back. He was in unfamiliar territory. They walked into the forest. Shadows flickered everywhere. The sunlight was blocked by the large trees. Heartstorm didn't like it. Suddenly, Heartstorm heard voices and the strong smell of ThunderClan. They reached large brambles and Waspnose slipped under. Reedstar followed him then the rest of RiverClan. Heartstorm noted that Palebird stayed last. Heartstorm went after Silverdrop, he bent down and crawled underneath. He found himself in a large clearing. There were many dens. They all looked as if they were covered in brambles. ThunderClan was surrounded by large trees protecting them from light and wind. Cats around the Clan stopped and turned to us. Of course, they knew RiverClan was coming but they still muttered amongst themselves. Falconstar appeared, he looked more confident and at home than ever. Heartstorm had never seen him like that.

"Greetings, RiverClan," he announced. "Today will be the first time we will be training to fight together. We will go the clearing and train for battle against ShadowClan."

"We will start immediately," finished Reedstar. Falconstar nodded and walked towards the camp entrance. RiverClan followed Falconstar out and a lot of ThunderClan warriors followed behind. Nobody talked. Only Reedstar and Falconstar politely chattered together. They reached a large clearing. RiverClan stood to one side and ThunderClan stood to another. Falconstar tutted.

"We are allies. We cannot be like this in battle," he told everybody. "I'd like everyone to tell their names so we can get to know each other better. As we are in ThunderClan, my Clan will start first." Reedstar sat down slightly in front of the group of RiverClan cats. Heartstorm watched as Palebird stepped forward.

"I'm Palebird," he said in a strong voice. Heartstorm smirked. Bumbleheart, a large tabby warrior pushed his chest out.

"I am Bumbleheart," he declared. Heartstorm felt Silverdrop flinch at the name.

"I'm Mistpool," said a silver she-cat.

"Darkstorm," a dark cat said, eyeing RiverClan accusingly. Heartstorm knew him and didn't back down when their eyes locked. A light orange she-cat came forward and mumbled her name.

"Speak up," Darkstorm spat. A cat Heartstorm knew as Bumblepaw went next.

"I'm Bramblescar," he said. He had become a warrior now. Another cat Heartstorm knew as Webpaw introduced himself as Webclaw. Then there was Blackfang and Blizzradcall followed by Duckpelt and finally Applenose.

"Thank you," Reedstar said, not looking very thankful. Now it was RiverClan's turn. Sparkbelly went first, being right next to Reedstar.

"I'm Sparkbelly," he said.

"Moorpelt," said Moorpelt.

"Beestripe."

"Embergaze."

"Softcry."

"Smoketail."

"Rainfeather." Silverdrop flicked her tail and her eyes scanned every ThunderClan cat. Heartstorm saw a few toms look at her in awe and he felt pride blaze in his chest. ThunderClan only wished they had cats like RiverClan in their Clan.

"I'm Silverdrop," Silverdrop said finally.

"And Heartstorm," finished Heartstorm, without glancing at the cats facing him.

"Right now that we all know each others names lets pair up," decided Falconstar. "Every cat goes with another cat from a different Clan. And we will have duels. No unsheathed claws. No hurting or harming ok? We're allies not enemies." There were a few mumbled yes and cats warily walked towards each other. Heartstorm waited to watch who had Silverdrop. She paired up with Applenose. He was glad for it as Applenose had kits and seemed ok. Heartstorm saw all his Clanmates join with another cat grumpily. Palebird approached Heartstorm, his eyes glimmering with mischief.

"Well big guy, guess it's you and me," he grinned. Heartstorm didn't reply.

"You may star whenever," Reedstar said. "We will come around and check on you." In a flash, Palebird leapt forward. He lashed out his claw. Heartstorm ducked quickly and twisted around, throwing out his right foot. He was suddenly wide awake and his body was buzzing. Palebird stumbled but didn't trip over. He lashed out once again and jumped. Heartstorm pushed Palebird off him and bit into his tail. Then he twisted around and tugged. Palebird grimaced in pain and angrily started to claw at him. Heartstorm dodged a few blows then went for a strong back kick. Palebird was knocked off balance. Heartstorm was on him in a second. He rolled Palebird onto his back and bit into the back of his head. He didn't

feel any pain. He didn't feel anything. Just the adrenaline pumping through him and the anger. Palebird rolled out of Heartstorm's grasp and toppled into him. Heartstorm felt himself hit the ground and quickly pushed off before Palebird could pin him down. He then hit Palebird hard on the head. Palebird growled and brought out his front paw hard into Heartstorm's cheek. Heartstorm stumbled back but didn't stop for a moment. He quickly lashed out once again and Palebird staggered back blinded for a moment. Heartstorm took his chance and leapt onto him, snarling angrily. He pinned Palebird down and clawed at his exposed stomach. Palebird tried to twist around to bite him.

"Good Heartstorm," commented Reedstar from nowhere. Heartstorm wasn't listening. As Palebird flipped over, Heartstorm barged into him. Palebird was knocked to the ground but now he was burning with anger. Without a thought, Palebird shoved Heartstorm off himself and landed on top of Heartstorm. He dug his claws into Heartstorm's side. Heartstorm felt hot pain in his sides and he groaned. He was more angry than ever. He unsheathed his claws in a swift motion and swiped Palebird's face. Palebird dropped off him, his cheek bleeding. Heartstorm rolled to his feet and shook himself. He crouched and leapt. He dug his claws into Palebird's shoulder and Palebird bit him hard into his ear. Heartstorm felt Palebird tugging hard. Heartstorm cringed in pain. He finally tore himself free and slashed Palebird's other cheek. Blood splurted out. Palebird looked furious. He jumped onto Heartstorm, slashing at anything he could. Heartstorm did the same, feeling happy whenever he felt his claws dig into something soft.

"Heartstorm!" yelled a voice.

"Palebird!" came another. "Palebird stop!" Palebird leapt off Heartstorm and glared at him, breathing hard. Heartstorm growled and shook himself. He turned to face Reedstar and Falconstar.

"What is the meaning of this?" spat Falconstar. "You are the only two pair who started to fight without control." Heartstorm was defiant but now felt slightly bad. Palebird spat at the ground.

"How am I supposed to?" he growled. "This is what I've been

training for. To rip RiverClan's pelts off." Reedstar let out a small growl and his tail moved in irritation. Falconstar flicked his tail to silence Palebird.

"You're not training with us anymore," he said gravely. "Get back to camp." Palebird hung his head but stood where he was. "I said get back to camp. Now." Palebird sighed and turned around. Silverdrop had stopped fighting as well and was staring. Heartstorm couldn't find the confidence to meet her eyes. He just looked at Reedstar.

"Heartstorm, why?" Reedstar asked calmly.

"I'm sorry Reedstar. I didn't mean to... We got carried away," Heartstorm apologised honestly. He felt bad. "I won't do it again."

"Do you need medical attention?" asked Reedstar. Heartstorm shook his head. He would deal with it. Reedstar nodded.

"Don't do it again," he warned. Falconstar stared at them, his eyes dark.

"So, aren't you going to punish him," he asked, raising his eyebrow.

"Heartstorm will not do it again," assured Reedstar.

"It doesn't matter. He did do it. And he must be punished. I punished my own. Now you must," Falconstar retorted.

"I will deal with my Clan however I like," replied Reedstar. Falconstar looked angry and upset. He opened his mouth to say more but finally just glared at Heartstorm.

"Applenose, go get Coldpelt," ordered Falconstar then he marched off. Reedstar walked after him. Applenose shot off and Silverdrop trotted to Heartstorm. She licked one of his bleeding wounds.

"Why did you do it?" Silverdrop asked.

"I just- we got carried away," Heartstorm shrugged. He didn't like the sad look Silverdrop was giving him.

"Heartstorm don't get yourself hurt where you don't need to," she said.

"I'm sorry. Don't worry about me," Heartstorm told her.

"How am I not to worry when you get yourself into a fight for no reason?" retorted Silverdrop coldly. "Heartstorm, you're not the only cat in the world who cares about things. You don't need to be the only one who worries about things. I worry too." Heartstorm frowned, confused by Silverdrop being suddenly mad.

"I don't want you to worry," Heartstorm told her.

"Yeah well I do," Silverdrop said firmly. "And if you want to help me not to worry, then stop doing stupid things. Like having a stupid fight with our *allies*." Heartstorm watched slightly heartbroken as Silverdrop stormed off. He had never had a fight with her like this. He felt cold, alone. He wanted to run after her and apologise but he knew she wanted space. So he stayed rooted on the spot.

Ch. 41

Heartstorm dodged, lunged, swiped and leapt. His movements were swift, hard and he never thought about it. He was flowing as quickly as a river. Coldpelt suddenly stopped and stood, breathing heavily. he flicked his tail.

"Let's take a break," he panted then turned around. Heartstorm sat down, and watched Silverdrop. She was fighting alongside Applenose against Deerflame. They were training by the river, in RiverClan. Heartstorm hadn't talked much to Silverdrop since the day before. He wanted to go over right then and tell her he was sorry. He wanted to tell her he loved her. He didn't know if she was still angry at him. Finally, they finished fighting and Silverdrop trotted to the river to drink. Picking up as much courage as he could muster, Heartstorm walked over to Silverdrop's side. She looked up and tilted her head.

"What's up?" she asked lightly. Heartstorm didn't know if that was a good sign.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," he sighed. "I got carried away. I understand why you'd be worried. I didn't mean to unsheathe my claws... it just was in the spur of the moment."

"Yeah well don't do it again, ok?" Silverdrop said, nuzzling him. Heartstorm felt extremely relieved. He licked her on the forehead.

"I won't," he murmured. Coldpelt was back again.

"Ready?" he asked gravely. Silverdrop gave Heartstorm a slight nod and padded away. Heartstorm faced Coldpelt for another session of training.

Heartstorm was sitting by the stream in RiverClan, thinking about his day. His muscles didn't ache anymore, he just felt tired. Training the whole day had reminded him of being an apprentice again. He

felt soft steps behind him. They were light and silent. The stream trickling made it hard to hear them. Heartstorm turned around. Brightpaw was crouching behind him. She groaned and rolled her eyes.

"Aww damn it!" she cried. "How did you hear me?"

"You were silent and the stream helped with the sound," Heartstorm said. "But I felt it. On the ground." Brightpaw sighed and sat down next to her father.

"I saw you training with ThunderClan today. Eelfrost let me watch you guys for a while," explained Brightpaw. "You were great. I never knew you were so good. You literally beat up that ThunderClan cat. It was so cool." Heartstorm chuckled then turned serious.

"Well, they're our allies now and I did not beat him up..." he said. "But thanks." He winked.

"I trained with Daisypaw today as well. We did some fighting in pairs. It was so fun. I think Eelfrost was really surprised," smiled Brightpaw. "I mean, we beat him."

"Haha, that's great," praised Heartstorm. "I'm proud of you. Heard of your brother? Haven't seen him today."

"Yeah, he did some intense training with Frogleap. Apparently they went to like this secluded area in RiverClan where there are loads of random plants and had this intense lesson about all of it. I saw Bumblepaw going into the apprentice den early. I think he's really tired," Brightpaw told Heartstorm. He nodded.

"Oh that explains it," he said.

"When will I be able to train with ThunderClan?" asked Brighpaw. "I could beat all the apprentices."

"Mmm, well don't get too excited," Heartstorm said. "But soon."

"Cool!" cried Brightpaw. "I'm going to sleep now. Good

night." Heartstorm gave her a small lick on the cheek.

"Good night, sweet dreams," he replied. He watched as she trotted away. He turned back to listen to the stream. He imagined Bumblepaw listening to it everynight. It calmed him. Another cat came up behind him. He thought it was Brightpaw for a moment but then recognised the smell.

"How was your day?" asked Deerflame. She put her paw into the water. "Mmm, it's cold." The breeze ruffled Deerflame's fur.

"Good," shrugged Heartstorm. "I mean, training sort of reminded me of apprentice days. It was hard but I like it."

"Yeah, I remember our swimming lessons. And that time we learnt fishing," grinned Deerflame. "It was so fun... and funny."

"Oh yeah," laughed Heartstorm, remembering the fond memories.

"Do you think we're going to be ready?" asked Deerflame suddenly, tilting her head. "For battle?"

"Yeah, of course," Heartstorm said convincingly although he did not believe so himself.

"Aren't you scared? For Silverdrop. For your kits?" asked Deerflame.

"Of course I am. And I worry about you and Eelfrost as well. I worry about the whole Clan getting hurt. But the best I can do is help everybody get ready for the worst so that when the time comes, there will be a smaller chance of cats getting hurt," Heartstorm exclaimed. Deerflame looked at him, as if seeing through him. Heartstorm sighed and looked at his paws. "But... I'm scared... I don't want Silverdrop to get hurt. I don't want Brightpaw to get hurt. I see her and I just... She's so happy, you know? Like so innocent. And she's so excited and she's so good at fighting. She really is. I'm not as scared for Bumblepaw. In a way, I'm glad that he chose to be a medicine cat. That way he won't ever know what fighting will be like."

"He'll see it," pointed out Deerflame. "Anyways, Brightpaw is a great cat. She's going to do great things."

"I hope so...," shrugged Heartstorm. He remembered seeing Hawkflight that day. He had not joined in with the training, making up some excuse. but Heartstorm remembered spotting him watching from afar. Something in Hawkflight's look made Heartstorm think Hawkflight was not very happy.

"I think Hawkflight is mad..." Heartstorm told Deerflame suddenly. Deerflame nodded.

"Oh he is," she assured him. "After all, ThunderClan killed his mentor." Wolfstep... Heartstorm's heart ached. He remembered the wise grey cat. He had been a loyal and great warrior.

"You should talk to him," suggested Deerflame. "He can't be like that. Imagine in battle, if he turns on them. You were his mentor after all... you can talk him out of it. Make him see sense." Heartstorm wasn't so sure. He understood how Hawkflight must feel. But he had to talk to him. Hawkflight might get hurt if he tried anything stupid in attempt to avenge Wolfstep.

"I'll talk to him now," decided Heartstorm, getting up. Deerflame stopped for a moment and touched her tail to Heartstorm's back.

"Wait," she said suddenly. Heartstorm looked at her in concern. He wondered if she was sick. She looked normal. Her stomach was not as lean though. Her fur was more puffy.

"What is it?" asked Heartstorm.

"I need to tell you something...," Deerflame said slowly. Heartstorm's heart raced. He didn't know what she was going to tell. He hoped it wasn't something bad. Not more bad news about ShadowClan... Please nothing about ShadowClan.

"Yes?" Heartstorm urged gently.

"Heartstorm.. Heartstorm...," Deerflame continued. "I'm pregnant." Heartstorm wasn't sure he had heard properly. He flicked

his ears and felt a weird flutter in his stomach.

"Sorry what did you say?" he asked. Deerflame looked shy. For the first time in his life, Heartstorm looked at Deerflame and she looked shy.

"I'm pregnant," repeated Deerflame. Heartstorm realised it was true. He had heard right. He imagined little kits. He imagined how happy Eelfrost would be. They would be great parents. He grinned broadly and jumped at Deerflame excitedly.

"Congratulations!" he shouted. "That's great!" Deerflame smiled but her smile faltered. She looked down at the ground.

"Yeah... I haven't told Eelfrost yet," she admitted. Heartstorm's eyes widened.

"Then what are you waiting for?" he cried. "Go tell him! He's going to freak out. In a good way, I mean."

"I know... I know..., that's what I'm scared about," Deerflame said softly.

"What? why?" exclaimed Heartstorm not understanding. This was great news. Why couldn't Deerflame see it?.

"I don't know...," murmured Deerflame. "I just... I can't be giving birth to kits just when we're about to go into battle with ShadowClan."

"What? Oh... Of course you can! You can stay in the nursery. We will protect you. Nothing will hurt you or your babies," Heartstorm assured her confidently. He would do anything to protect his best friend.

"I don't want to be in the nursery," grumbled Deerflame. "I want to go out to battle. To be with you guys. And Eelfrost. I don't want him to get hurt..."

"Deerflame...," Heartstorm trailed off.

"I don't want Eelfrost to get hurt... when I'm not there. I don't

want our kits to grow up.., not knowing their father...," whispered Deerflame.

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"Hawkflight, are you alright?" Heartstorm asked. Hawkflight turned around and flicked his tail. They had just finished a training session. They sat, staring at the stream trickling by.

"What? Yeah of course," Hawkflight said quickly, not looking very convinced. Heartstorm raised an eyebrow.

"Mmm," Heartstorm said unbelievingly. "Hawkflight... I know you're thinking about Wolfstep." Hawkflight was quiet. "I do too."

"You don't get it," said Hawkglight stubbornly.

"Of course I do!" exclaimed Heartstorm then sighed. "Well maybe I don't entirely. But you can't hold this grudge." Hawkflight leapt to his feet.

"They killed him! They killed Wolfstep!" shouted Hawkflight, lashing his tail angrily.

"I know... I know," Heartstorm said softly. "Calm down. Look, they're our allies now."

"Stupid allies! That's all a lie! We hate them! they hate us! We'll never be *friends*," spat Hawkflight.

"Of course not," Heartstorm said. "They're not ever going to be their friends. But you have to put what happened to Wolfstep away. It's over. And right now, we are fighting *with* ThunderClan. Not against them."

"I'd rather fight them," growled Hawkflight. "I saw him.. I saw Wolfstep die in front of me."

"Hawkflight... I know," Heartstorm said comfortingly. "But you need to see that you can't hold on to that right now. There are other things at hand."

"I don't care about stupid ShadowClan!" snapped Hawkflight. "I care about Wolfstep. He needs to be avenged."

"Hawkflight. You cannot hurt any of the ThunderClan cats. They are our allies. This isn't a request," Heartstorm said firmly. Hawkflight looked at him with narrowed eyes and finally huffed.

"Whatever," he said and stormed away.

Everyday they trained. Some days, Heartstorm would go to ThunderClan in the mornings or in the afternoons according to which group he was in. He would hunt or go on border patrols at other time. He found himself being more busy than ever before. Days were getting longer. The sun would stay up till very late and set just as late. Nights were shorter and Heartstorm found himself feeling tired almost every day. The more the training for intense, the more Heartstorm worried. Green-leaf was just around the corner. It was the next day. He could feel it in his body and around him, the world was changing. The grass was green. In the morning, birds sung merrily. The trees had beautiful green leaves and delicate flowers. Small flowers had bloomed on the ground. The river was getting nice and warm. Sometimes, Heartstorm was so hot he had to take a cooling swim in the river. Heartstorm had just finished training and was resting beside the stream. He had to go on a hunting patrol later on. Heartstorm spotted Hawkflight padding through camp. He thought about going to talk to him but Hawkflight needed time. Heartstorm got up and trotted up to the camp entrance. He waited for Deerflame and Eelfrost. Finally, they arrived. Deerflame said something to Eelfrost and his face turned from confused to shocked to great joy. Eelfrost leapt up and yelled.

"What! YOU'RE KIDDING! THIS IS THE BEST NEWS EVER!" he hollered. Heartstorm smiled, knowing what Deerflame had just told him. He trotted to them. Eelfrost ran at him and almost toppled into him.

"We're going to have kits!" he yelled in Heartstorm's face. Heartstorm chuckled but felt happy for his best friend.

"That's great!" he cried, smiling. Eelfrost ran off into camp and Heartstorm and Deerflame watched amused. They heard a loud

shout.

"WE're having kits!" Eelfrost's voice carried outside. Heartstorm burst out laughing and Deerflame managed a small chuckle.

"Come on," Heartstorm said gently. "Go celebrate with him. This is not something you should be sad about."

"I know, you're right," decided Deerflame. Heartstorm smiled fondly as he heard Deerflame yell happily back.

"I'm pregnant!" Silverdrop appeared.

"Congratulations! that's great news," she smiled. "I'm so happy for you." Deerflame and Silverdrop engaged in conversation. The hunting patrol looked as if it was going to be delayed. Heartstorm waited a few more minutes more until finally, Eelfrost and Deerflame joined him for the hunting patrol.

"Did you see Reedstar's face?" laughed Eelfrost. "He was so shocked."

"He's always wanted grandkits," Deerflame said. "He's so happy." They chatted merrily until finally, they knew they had to hunt. They went quiet but as they stalked prey together, there was an excited and happy buzz around them. Heartstorm felt his aching and tiredness lift. Yes, war was approaching but still, small things brought happiness. This was one of those times. He couldn't help smiling as they trotted back into camp, prey hanging plentifully from their mouths. Bumblepaw rushed to Heartstorm.

"Did you hear the news?" he exclaimed.

"I did!" Heartstorm said.

"Eelfrost said that when Deerflame gives birth, I'll be there to help him," declared Bumblepaw proudly. Heartstorm chuckled.

"How are you getting along with your training?" he asked.

"I've learnt so many things. I'm going to be so prepared for

when the battle comes... although I wished it would never come," Bumblepaw huffed then brightened up. "But I know it's going to be alright. Frogleap is a great medicine cat. He also taught me a few moves today. To defend myself in case." Heartstorm nodded.

"That's good," he said approvingly.

"There's a Gathering tomorrow," added Bumblepaw. "I can't wait!" Heartstorm nodded.

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that. I wonder how it's going to be," Heartstorm thought aloud.

"Yeah... With us planning against ShadowClan and all...," said Bumblepaw. "Oh well....I can't wait to see the other medicine cats again!" Heartstorm smiled at Bumblepaw's enthusiasm.

"Yeah...," Heartstorm said, his mind drifting. Cinderstar's words rung clearly in his head. He remembered what she had said. That ShadowClan had planned to attack them on the first full moon of the green-leaf. In a day. Heartstorm knew that Cinderstar could have been lying but his stomach somersaulted nervously and Heartstorm felt a deep dread. He padded towards Silverdrop, needing her comfort. She cocked her head at him and ran her tail down his spine.

"You're worried about tomorrow," stated Silverdrop. Heartstorm didn't need to say anything, Silverdrop understood. He wanted to stay with her one more night, looking down from their hill, without a worry in their minds.

"What if Cinderstar was not lying?" I asked.

"Reedstar took that into account and decided that we should not listen to her," Silverdrop answered with a small shrug. "We cannot do anything about it but get ready. If they attack tomorrow..." Silverdrop shuddered at the thought. "We will be ready."

Ch. 43

They were sitting at the top of the hill. Heartstorm's heart skipped a beat. He gazed out below him. He took in the warm fresh air and then looked up at the night sky. Stars sparkled brightly; little blinking lights. The moon was large and glowing. Almost round. Heartstorm shuffled closer to Silverdrop. She huddled nearer to him and twirled her tail around his.

"Whatever happens tomorrow, we're in it together," whispered Silverdrop.

"Yeah," agreed Heartstorm. Heartstorm didn't know how he could feel so comfortable, so safe. He felt warm. His worries were washed away. All that mattered was where he was..., who he was with. Silverdrop. He stared into her eyes. He got lost in their beautiful swirls of blue.

"I love you," breathed Heartstorm.

"I love you more," answered Silverdrop. Heartstorm closed his eyes and leaned his head against Silverdrop. He breathed in her sweet scent. He wanted to keep her close forever. He wanted to stay like this forever. But he knew he couldn't.

"Do you really think they're going to attack, tomorrow?" asked Heartstorm. Silverdrop was quiet for a moment then flicker her tongue over Heartstorm's snout.

"Let's stop talking about the future for now, please?" suggested Silverdrop. She was right. Heartstorm nodded and smiled, relieved.

"Of course," he said. Gladly. "I used to think ShadowClan was the best Clan." Silverdrop looked up at Heartstorm questioningly, her eyes urging him to continue.

"But... I guess... Since I've lived some time in ShadowClan...

Well, my whole childhood there actually and a few days in WindClan and now, I am RiverClan. I think that every cat thinks the same thing. Every Clan works the same way. Every kit grows up learning the same things. We're not so different. In ShadowClan, all I wanted to do was grow older and become a great warrior for my Clan. In WindClan, that's what all the apprentices wanted as well. And in RiverClan, that's what our kits aspire to be too." Silverdrop was silent, as if considering this. "I guess what I'm trying to say is... the best Clan, to me, is where my family, my friends, my home is. And RiverClan is all that." Heartstorm listened to the crickets chirping and an owl hooted. He felt so at home. He loved the views RiverClan offered. He loved the smells. He loved the sounds. He loved everything about RiverClan. It was his home.

Heartstorm slipped back into camp and after seeing Silverdrop curl into her nest, he padded to the nursery. He didn't know why he went there. His fondest memories were there. He peered inside. It was dark and empty. He had never seen it like that. It had always been full of life and love. The sand was still soft but it wasn't as warm with nobody living in the den. Heartstorm slowly slipped out and passed the elder's den. He heard a rustle and snapped around. Thornstar appeared. He stood in the shadows.

"Oh hi Thornstar," Heartstorm said, almost jumping.

"Hello Heartstorm," Thornstar said. "What are you doing walking around at this time?"

"I just... I wanted to just look around...," Heartstorm shrugged. He didn't know what he was doing either.

"You think Cinderstar was telling the truth. That ShadowClan will attack us tomorrow," Thornstar stated.

"I don't-" Heartstorm denied.

"Don't lie to me Heartstorm," Thornstar said, looking hurt. "I hope Brightpaw will be alright."

"Yeah... of course she will. I'll be there with her, no matter what," Heartstorm assured him.

"Good," nodded Thornstar. "Now, I'll be going back to my den." Heartstorm watched as Thornstar turned around and hobbled back to his den. Thornstar's voice was gruffer and his steps heavier. His steps were not as confident and strong. Heartstorm knew Thornstar was old. He padded towards the apprentice den. he wanted to see his kits. He poked his head inside. There was gentle breathing from within. He slipped inside quietly. He wondered if the apprentices would wake up and get scared to find him there. He hoped they wouldn't. He passed Daisypaw and Heatherpaw. He looked down at Brightpaw. She was lying on her stomach, her paws folded in front of her. Her head rested gently on one of her paws. Her tail twitched. She looked as if she was having a happy dream. Heartstorm smiled to himself. He then walked over to the end of the den. Inside was curled Bumblepaw. Bumblepaw was curled tightly in a ball with his tail over his eyes. He was breathing slowly and looked comfortable. Heartstorm bent down and cocked his head. Bumblepaw did look exactly like him. He smiled fondly and slipped out of the den. He bumped into another cat and stumbled back. He unsheathed his claws in a flash and his eyes locked with the cat.

"Heartstorm!" exclaimed Reedstar. "What are you doing up this late?"

"Silverdrop and I went for a walk," Heartstorm explained. "We just got back. I just wanted to check on the kits... apprentices."

"OH alright," nodded Reedstar then flicked his tail. "I was going to see Frogleap. I remember what Cinderstar said. And I want you to know; I am taking that into account. Tomorrow, I will make sure that our camp will not be unprotected. I'm not taking any risks." Heartstorm wanted to whoop in joy and relief.

"Oh thank you Reedstar!" gushed Heartstorm.

"Don't thank me. It's my duty, as leader," Reedstar replied firmly. "You should go to sleep now. You never know... you might need quite a lot of energy tomorrow." Heartstorm nodded and headed back to his den. He slipped inside and walked past his sleeping Clanmates. He walked onto his nest and lay down. He rested his head and closed his eyes. He started to think about the next day but sleep slowly tugged at him like the current. The

current pulled him under.

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The whole day, Heartstorm dreaded the Gathering. As he went to the border patrol, all he could do was stare out towards where ShadowClan camp would be. When he went to the hunting patrol, all he could do was think about ShadowClan ambushing them. When they were training, all Heartstorm imagined was fighting a ShadowClan warrior. By the end of the day, Heartstorm was tired and wary of thinking. He didn't want ShadowClan on his mind. He wanted to think about other things but no matter how much he tried, he couldn't get the annoying tugging thoughts to go away. Finally, evening came and Heartstorm's dreaded moment had arrived.

"Those attending the Gathering tonight will be Blacktail, Heartstorm, Sparkbelly, Eelfrost, Embergaze, Smoketail and Stripedfur," announced Reedstar. There was some murmuring. That was not many cats. "I know that is not a lot of cats. But we have reason to think ShadowClan might attack tonight. I want to make sure they do not. I want Beestripe, Rainfeather, Applenose and Cloudbreeze positioned at the WindClan border when we leave. I have not told ThunderClan about this threat as I do not want them to be alarmed. They will come to the Gathering and if something happens, they will come to our help. But we will not trouble them with this extra caution. I also want Sparkbelly and Moorpelt patrolling around RiverClan and Mudclaw and Rosebriar to stand guard right outside camp. The other warriors, I'd like you to stay in camp and be ready for danger. I want the apprentices, except Bumblepaw, to be in camp tonight and queen's..." Reedstar's gaze landed on Deerflame. "To be in the nursery; protected with the elders. Apprentices..., don't be disappointed, you will be able to help around Clan but hopefully, nothing will happen." Reedstar leapt off the High Rock and was immediately engaged in a conversation with Blacktail. Heartstorm's heart raced. He joined Silverdrop.

"You're staying in camp," he said, feeling extremely relieved.

"Take care of the kits... Brightpaw looks skeptical."

"What do you mean he said?" asked Silverdrop, giving Heartstorm a lick on the cheek. "About Bumblepaw." Heartstorm shrugged and frowned. He trotted over to Reedstar. Blacktail and Reedstar broke their conversation and turned to Heartstorm.

"What did you mean about Bumblepaw?" asked Heartstorm.

"He's going to the Gatherine," replied Reedstar then turned for the camp entrance. "Let's go!" Heartstorm's jaw dropped and felt dread spread through him. He hurried after Reedstar.

"What do you mean?!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean he's coming?"

"He's a medicine cat. He has to go," Reedstar said. "Don't worry, nothing will happen." Heartstorm bit his tongue in frustration and trotted over to Brightpaw and Bumblepaw. Brightpaw was looking frustrated and angry. She was ranting to Bumblpeaw, lashing her tail wildly. Bumblepaw looked excited but tried to keep his feelings away from Brightpaw as not to get her hyped.

"It's alright, maybe next time," he comforted his sister.

"Bumblepaw, I do not want you going to the Gathering," Heartstorm said firmly. Bumblepaw gaped.

"I'm a medicine cat," he argued.

"Apprentice," corrected Heartstorm.

"Yes but I'm a medicine cat *apprentice* I have to go. Plus, nobody is going to hurt me," shrugged Bumblepaw. Frogleap joined them. He gave Heartstorm a hard look.

"He's my apprentice, I can take are of him, thank you," Frogleap said firmly. "Don't worry." Heartstorm opened his mouth to protest but Frogleap dragged Bumblepaw away. Bumblepaw mouthed sorry although he looked slightly relieved.

"Ugh that's not fair!" exclaimed Brightpaw. "I should go! This is so unfair!" Heartstorm didn't want to argue. He marched to the camp entrance where the small group of cats were gathered. They were leaving soon. If Bumblepaw was going, Heartstorm would keep an eye on him. Reedstar flicked his tail and nodded goodbye to Blacktail. She was staying in camp that night.

"Let's go!" Reedstar said loudly. Together, the RiverClan cats ran swiftly towards the WindClan border. Heartstorm felt adrenaline pulse through him. Something rushed through him. He didn't know what it was. Soon, they reached WindClan border. One by one, they slipped into the dark tunnel and emerged on the otherside. The long grasses swayed around them. They kept running forward. Heartstorm's eyes locked onto Bumblepaw. Bumblepaw was running, his face plastered with glee. He looked exhilarated. No WindClan cats appeared. Soon, the Four Trees could be seen in the distance. Heartstorm's heart almost leapt to his throat. He ran with apprehension. They reached the Clearing. They were alone. Reedstar looked around, eyes narrowed. Everybody glanced around warily in turn. Heartstorm felt fear coursing through him. Why was nobody there? He wanted to run back to camp with Bumblepaw and make sure everything was fine there. Suddenly, there was a strong whiff and some pattering of feet. Reedstar swivelled around and ThunderClan burst through. Falconstar greeted Reedstar with a nod. As RiverClan and ThunderClan had trained together for almost a moon, they all socialised. Except Heartstorm. He stood there, watching and waiting. He made sure he saw Bumblepaw at all times. Bumblepaw was talking to the ThunderClan medicine cat with Frogleap. Then he turned to talk to some apprentices. Coldpelt trotted up to Heartstorm. Heartstorm didn't want to talk. Where was ShadowClan? Come on ShadowClan... come on.

"Hey, what are you doing?" asked Coldpelt, looking suspicious.

"Nothing," Heartstorm muttered, his ears pricked.

"The other Clans are just late," Coldpelt shrugged then padded away since Heartstorm was not saying anything. Reedstar broke away from Falconstar and walked up to Heartstorm.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Socialise."

"Where is ShadowClan?" Heartstorm just retorted.

"They will come," Reedstar said surely.

"How do you know?" snapped Heartstorm then quickly regretted it. He hadn't meant to be rude. "What if they're attacking our Clan right now?"

"They're not," said Reedstar surely. "I'd know." Heartstorm didn't know what he meant by that.

"How?" he exclaimed. Waspnose trotted up to them.

"Sorry, could I talk to you?" he asked, not looking at Heartstorm and not feeling sorry at all. Reedstar nodded.

"Don't get too worked up," Reedstar murmured in Heartstorm's ear. Heartstorm was feeling more scared by the minute. His body buzzed. His mind was filled with ugly images. The longer ShadowClan took to come, the more sure Heartstorm was. ShadowClan was indeed attacking that night. Heartstorm felt his stomach flip. His body twitched. He had never felt like this before. He closed his eyes. He tried to calm himself down. His breathing quickened. His heart beat raced. ShadowClan was not coming. Suddenly, there was a shout.

"They're here!" called Darkstorm. Heartstorm's eyes flew open. He heard the sound of footsteps. Many footsteps. He smelt the stinging smell of ShadowClan. Suddenly, Clawstar appeared. His eyes were dark and his muscles rippled underneath his fur. Other cats filtered out of the shadows. ShadowClan had arrived.

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ShadowClan crowded on the otherside of the clearing, glaring at the rest of the cats. Falconstar and Reedstar stopped talking to each other and each Clan grouped back together. Reedstar, Falconstar and Clawstar gathered in a small circle, talking quietly. Reedstar lift his gaze and his eyes landed on me. With a flick of his tail, the three leaders leapt upon the large rock. Heartstorm's body tingled with anticipation.

"We have decided to start the Gathering without WindClan. As they are late," announced Clawstar, a malicious glint in his eyes. Heartstorm felt his fur rising. Clawstar's eyes swept over the cats and rested on Heartstorm. He tilted his head, his yellow eyes piercing into Heartstorm. He curled his lip slightly and Heartstorm felt a shudder run through him. He glanced to the side and spotted Bumblepaw. Bumblepaw looked contempt; looking around in awe at everything. Frogleap was perched looking grumpy beside him. Clawstar eyes flickered to Bumblepaw and he gave a small small. Heartstorm swallowed.

"We will start," interrupted Falconstar. He stepped forward and flicked his tail. "ThunderClan is thriving. We are all happy that green-leaf has finally arrived. We have four new apprentices, Stonepaw, Moonpaw, Spottedpaw and Nightpaw." Falconstar tilted his head. ThunderClan cheered their apprentices'. RiverClan joined in. Heartstorm cried out Moonpaw and Stonepaw's names but then found his voice dry. He coughed slightly. He felt something bad tugging at him. He siddled up to Eelfrost. Eelfrost leaned over to him.

"Why isn't WindClan here?" asked Eelfrost. Heartstorm shrugged. That was the least of his worries. Who cared about WindClan? They were probably too weak or something. WindClan was no threat.

"Did you see how Clawstar looked at Bumblepaw?" whispered Heartstorm. Eelfrost frowned.

"Nah," Eelfrost answered. "He just looks at everybody like that." Heartstorm wasn't so sure. The cheering dimmed down and there was silence once more. The moon shone brightly above the sky and no clouds were in sight. Maybe everything would be alright. Maybe Heartstorm was getting all worked up for nothing.

"Thank you ThunderClan. We are happy for you," Reedstar said without glancing at Falconstar or ThunderClan. "RiverClan is also doing just as well." One ShadowClan warrior snickered loudly. Reedstar ignored him. Heartstorm swivelled his head though and spotted the cat who had snickered. It was Rabbitleap. He stood at the base of the rock and he looked smug. Heartstorm wanted to rip his smile off his face.

"What's with him?" muttered Eelfrost.

"All of ShadowClan are like that," grumbled Smoketail.

"I am glad to announce that we have new apprentices as well," continued Reedstar on a bright note. "Bumblepaw, Daisypaw, Heatherpaw and Brightpaw." RiverClan shouted out the names loudly. Heartstorm would have felt a bubble of pride if it had been a normal Gathering. But this was no normal Gathering. WindClan wasn't there. ThunderClan was their ally. ShadowClan despised them. Heartstorm heard ThunderClan joining in on the chants but he didn't care. He turned to look at ShadowClan. All the cats had dark looks on their faces. Some were hissing and others were growling under their breaths. Heartstorm felt himself bristling as he caught sight of Firfrost and his vibrant coat. Firfrost's eyes were fixed on Bumblepaw. Heartstorm wanted to yell at him to stop staring. Something in Firfrost's eyes made Heartstorm sure that Firfrost was not looking at Bumblepaw in a friendly way.

"Thank you Reedstar," Clawstar said slowly, his voice deep and sharp. He stood in front of all the cats and ShadowClan straightened up. "I'm *glad* to hear the good news of RiverClan and ThunderClan." Clawstar spit the words out like they were toxic. "But... I can't help but wonder why, if RiverClan has new apprentices, why aren't they here?" That was a good point. Heartstorm's eyes darted to Reedstar. Reedstar gave no answer, he just stared on blankly.

"And why, if RiverClan are doing so *well*, why are there only seven warriors here representing RiverClan," slurred Clawstar. Heartstorm bit his tongue. He could feel ThunderClan's questioning gaze on them and ShadowClan's smirks.

"Ugh, I hate him so much," spat Eelfrost under his breath.

"I know son, I know," muttered Embergaze.

"Thank you for your concern," Reedstar replied lightly. Heartstorm was glad that they had a leader who didn't lose his cool. He could hear it in Reedstar's voice that he was confident but somehow, Heartstorm knew that Reedstar's mind was racing. That Reedstar was trying to think up an excuse quickly. Something in the way Reedstar stood made Heartstorm know that Reedstar wasn't as confident as he made it out to be.

"But... that is none of your business," Reedstar finished. Sparkbelly and Stripedfur shifted uncomfortably beside Heartstorm.

"Well, this is a Gathering. Pray, tell us what is going on," urged Clawstar smugly. Reedstar gave him a glowering look then turned to the clearing. Heartstorm hoped he knew what he was doing.

"I don't answer to you, Clawstar," replied Reedstar curtly. Falconstar stepped in.

"He has said all there is to be said," Falconstar said forcefully. "Why don't you go, Clawstar?" Reedstar gave Falconstar a small thankful nod and Clawstar hissed.

"So ThunderClan is taking RiverClan's side, eh?" he growled. Falconstar looked at him in disdain. "Well ShadowClan is doing great. ShadowClan is strong. We are ready to fight. Whenever. Wherever." Heartstorm wanted to roll his eyes. That was all ShadowClan said at Gatherings nowadays. Just stupid words about how good their Clan is.

"So come on, pick a fight," grinned Clawstar. Reedstar and Falconstar's furrowed their brows.

"What are you saying, Clawstar?" demanded Reedstar. Clawstar's eyes glowed and he chuckled lightly.

"Oh nothing," he giggled. "Well, we aren't picking a fight. No no no, we've come here in *peace*." The words peace on Clawstar's tongue were dirty. Heartstorm didn't recognise him. He didn't recognise his former mentor. This wasn't the strong mentor that had taught him things when Pinestar had passed away. This was a cold, deadly cat. A cat with nothing on his mind but vengeance and violence. Heartstorm knew that ShadowClan had turned into a bloodthirsty Clan. He wondered what had happened. He remembered it as a nurturing, happy but still strong Clan. He remembered it as his childhood home. Where Stormpelt had brought him up. Where he had learnt for the first time to hunt and fight. Now, ShadowClan had turned into something darker. Maybe it had been the absence of Pinestar and now Cinderstar. Heartstorm had a sad feeling that maybe it had been his fault. But no, how could it be? They had thrown him out. They had exiled him. It was their lost. Their fault. Their mistake. Heartstorm was RiverClan now and ShadowClan resented everything for that. Suddenly, Heartstorm realised what had been bothering him. Nothing had been right all along. He was right to have been worried. He shouldn't have let his guard down when ShadowClan had arrived. He shouldn't have dismissed WindClan. Heartstorm groaned inwardly. He needed to tell someone. He needed to warn Reedstar. He needed to get back to Clan. To keep Bumblepaw safe. Heartstorm wanted to bite himself for being so stupid. Of course, ShadowClan was still the enemy here but ShadowClan had also found their own allies. Suddenly, a loud shriek slashed through the Gathering. Every cat turned their head back. Heartstorm's suspicions were confirmed.

WindClan was attacking RiverClan.

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Heartstorm was frozen on the spot. His mind raced. He should run back to camp right now. He should have warned Reedstar. He couldn't believe what was happening. ThunderClan whispered and muttered, not really knowing what was happening. Reedstar looked towards RiverClan, his brow furrowed. Heartstorm heard a collective gasp and he looked up. He bit his tongue and he stopped breathing for a second. He hadn't even realised it. The sky suddenly was mingling with grey clouds. One large thunderous grey cloud was slowly floating towards the light of the bright round moon. Darkness crept into the clearing. Heartstorm felt his heart racing. He had to do something. But his mind and body didn't seem to work. Suddenly, there was a ear shattering screech. An angry yowl. A war cry. Heartstorm spun around and saw Clawstar. Clawstar stood at the end of the large rock. He had his chest puffed out and his claws unsheathed. Suddenly, in a swift motion, ShadowClan moved. Heartstorm couldn't even process what was happening. Suddenly, he was shoved to the ground. The wind was knocked out of him. He blindly trashed out and rolled away from his attacker's grasp. Firfrost stood in front of him, lashing his tail angrily. All around him, cries and growls were echoing. Chaos had erupted. Every cat was fighting.

"Oh Heartstorm," Firfrost growled. "You should never have done what you did." Heartstorm growled, not taking in Firfrost's words. A new problem flashed in his mind. Bumblepaw. He tried to dodge Firfrost but Firfrost was concentrated on him.

"You're not going anywhere," hissed Firfrost. Heartstorm growled back and lashed out. He felt his claws sink into Firfrost's soft cheek. Blood splattered. Firfrost gave out a cry of pain then quickly leapt at Heartstorm. Heartstorm felt hot pain sear through his sides and pushed Firfrost off with great strength. He stumbled back. He winced but dodged another of Firfrost's attacks and bit into Firfrost's neck. Firfrost writhed and trashed. One of his claws caught Heartstorm on the side. Heartstorm growled and felt blood

trickle down his stomach. He didn't care. He needed to get back to camp. He needed to make sure his mate and daughter were ok. He needed to find Bumblepaw. Bumblepaw needed to get out of there. Heartstorm tasted sweet and warm blood on his mouth. He dug his teeth deeper into Firfrost's neck. He felt Firfrost weaken. Firfrost slumped to the ground, breathing hard. Heartstorm hissed and slapped him hard on the head. Then he slipped away. Cats were fighting. ShadowClan against ThunderClan and RiverClan. Heartstorm weaved through the hissing cats. He couldn't feel any pain. Suddenly, he spotted Eelfrost. Eelfrost battled against two ShadowClan warriors. Honeylight and Nightcloud. Heartstorm growled. Eelfrost was looking panicky. With a snarl, Heartstorm launched himself on Nightcloud. He pulled her away from Eelfrost. Honeylight looked surprised and for a moment, she was distracted. Eelfrost barged into her, knocking her to the ground. Meanwhile, Heartstorm dug his claws into Nightcloud's side. She whirled around and shot out her right front paw. She caught Heartstorm near the eye. He felt her cold claws dig into his skin right under his eye. His world went blurry. He stumbled back. Nightcloud leapt at him and they rolled to the ground. Heartstorm felt a burst of anger and pushed her off with a grunt. She rolled away and he bit into her tail hard. Nightcloud turned around, her eyes flashing with anger.

"Traitor!" she hissed. Heartstorm ignored her. He dodged another of her blows then shoved her to the ground. Then he grabbed her tail in his mouth and dug his teeth into it. He tasted more blood and a hard tendon. Nightcloud wailed in pain. Heartstorm didn't stop. He tugged at her tail and bit harder. His jaw tightened. Nightcloud lashed out her front paw and caught Heartstorm on the ear. She wriggled and tried to break free but Heartstorm didn't let go. He kept her tail clamped in his mouth. Suddenly, he felt the strong muscle break. Nightcloud's tail went limp. Nightcloud's eyes widened. A horrible cry echoed from her mouth. She took a step back then fled through the crowd. Heartstorm breathed heavily then turned around. He couldn't dwell on Nightcloud. Eelfrost was still battling Honeylight. She was stronger and leaner than Heartstorm remembered. Honeylight had almost pinned Eelfrost to the ground. He was bleeding from cuts on his side and Eelfrost's left ear looked messed up. Without thinking, Heartstorm leapt off the ground. He landed with a loud thud onto

Honeylight's back. She collpased onto Eelfrost. Eelfrost slipped out from under her and sunk his teeth into Honeylight's ear. Meanwhile, Heartstorm held her down and clawed at her sides. He felt the skin break and blood seep through. Honeylight wailed and sprang free.

"Heartstorm!" she spat and lashed out at him. Heartstorm was taken aback by her voice and didn't dodge. Her unsheathed paw hit Heartstorm hard. His world swirled. Heartstorm waited for Honeylight to pounce on him and bite into his neck but it didn't come. He shook himself and took a ragged breath. He slowly got up. Eelfrost was panting, looking around the Clearing fearfully. The fight was still raging but now some cats had ventured out of the Clearing. Only a few more cats remained. Heartstorm spotted Embergaze laying on the floor in the shadows. Eelfrost glanced at Heartstorm, nodded at him in thanks and then rushed towards Embergaze. Heartstorm spotted Coldpelt battling with Darkspeck. Darkspeck's eyes blazed with anger and rage. He was battling as if he didn't care for his life. Or Coldpelt's. Heartstorm charged at them and into Darkspeck. Darkspeck hit the ground with a loud thud. In a flash, Coldpelt had him pinned down. Heartstorm lashed at Darkspeck's face. Darkspeck reared up and hissed. Coldpelt bit into his stomach and Darkspeck knew it was time to go. Heartstorm hissed as Darkspeck sped off. Coldpelt took a deep breath. He suddenly looked frail.

"You ok?" asked Heartstorm. "Where's Frogleap? Bumblepaw... Go see one of them." Coldpelt gave a small nod.

"Thanks," he breathed then limped off. Heartstorm looked around. There was no sign of Blacktail. No sign of Reedstar. No sign of Bumblepaw. No more cats remained in the Clearing except Embergaze and Eelfrost. Heartstorm hoped Embergaze was alright. Eelfrost turned to Heartstorm, his eyes wet with sadness. Heartstorm stood on the spot. He had to find Bumblepaw. His kits. His mate. Eelfrost knew understood. He gave a slight nod. Heartstorm bit back a sob and whirled around. He raced into the long grasses and out of the Clearing where the battle still raged on.

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Heartstorm charged through the tall grasses. Everything was dark. Heartstorm heard grunts and howls coming from every direction. He kept charging through the grasses. Towards RiverClan. He had to find Bumblepaw. Make sure Bumblepaw was ok then get back to camp and make sure Silverdrop and Brightpaw were ok. Suddenly, Heartstorm skidded to a halt, Reedstar was wrestling with a large ShadowClan cat. Heartstorm was taken by surprise and froze on the spot but suddenly, his training came back to him. He leapt onto Rabbitleap's back and tore him off Reedstar. He dug his claws into Rabbitleaps' sides and drew blood. Reedstar rammed into Rabbitleap. Rabbitleap thudded to the ground and groaned. With a growl, Reedstar grabbed Rabbitleap's scruff and shook him. Rabbitleap growled then scampered away into the dark grasses. Reedstar turned to Heartstorm, his breath heavy. He had a nasty cut along the side of his face but his eyes were gleaming with defiance.

"Thanks," panted Reedstar. "We need to group. We need to find the others. Think of a strategy. Get back to the Clearing." Heartstorm opened his mouth to argue. He had to find Bumblepaw.

"Right," he sad at last.

"Round up as many RiverClan and ThunderClan cats you can," Reedstar ordered. Heartstorm gave a brief nod but Reedstar was already gone. With a deep breath, Heartstorm turned around and hurtled back towards the Clearing. He prayed to Brightheart and StarClan that no cat from his Clan would die. That Bumblepaw would be protected. That Silverdrop wouldn't get hurt. That Brightpaw wouldn't have to fight. He heard some grunting and hissing and crept towards the noise. Everything was almost pitch black. Heartstorm felt as if someone could just creep up at him and ambush him. Two shapes were wrestling in the dark. Featherflame and Palebird. Heartstorm felt his heart thump against his chest. Featherflame... He hadn't seen her in so long. He was stuck. He should help Palebird. They were on the same side. But he had never

gotten on with Palebird. Featherflame on the other hand... Palebird leapt away from Featherflame's grasp and spat. His eyes darted and landed on Heartstorm.

"What are you doing?" he hissed. "Just watching? Or are you actually a ShadowClan cat?" Featherflame saw Heartstorm and stopped in her tracks for a moment.

"Heartstorm...," her voice was soft. Then something flared in her eyes and she lashed her tail. She pounced onto Heartstorm. Heartstorm sight blurred. He felt claws in his sides, digging into his skin. He wriggled free from Featherflame's grasp but she managed to keep him pinned down. With a growl, Heartstorm snapped at her and caught a chunk of her fur in his mouth. He dug his teeth as deep as he could until he tasted a bit of blood. Then he tugged and wrenched. Suddenly, the weight lifted off him and Heartstorm rolled to his feet, feeling unbalanced and disorientated. Palebird had Featherflame by the scruff. She angrily scratched him on the neck. He shook her but she kept fighting. She twisted out of his reach then went for a back kick. Palebird dodged swiftly then rammed into her. She fell to the ground. In a second, Palebird was on top of her, he claws at her stomach. Blood spluttered everywhere. Heartstorm shook himself. Featherflame... He couldn't wrap his mind around what had happened.

"You're welcome," Palebird called while holding Featherflame down. Heartstorm was still shaken. He only remembered Featherflame's comforting eyes. Her promise. Suddenly, Featherflame lashed out and broke free from Palebird's grasp. She dodged another of Palebird's blows. Then she bit his neck. She held onto his neck, biting hard and drawing blood. Palebird's eyes rolled over. His body weakened. He gave a low groan. Suddenly, Heartstorm snapped out of whatever trance he'd been in. In a flash, he slashed Featherflame's throat. He felt his claws slit her throat in a clean movement. Blood spilled out. Featherflame collapsed to the floor. She twitched then breathed no more. Palebird staggered back, his neck bleeding heavily. He looked disorientated and unhealthy.

"Thanks a lot," muttered Palebird. "At least you did something in the end." Heartstorm looked down at the dead cat.

Featherflame looked so peaceful and still, except for the pool of blood gathering on the ground beside her. Heartstorm shuddered. He had just killed a cat. Another cat. He hadn't felt like this with Cinderstar. A cold feeling washed over Heartstorm. He pushed the image of Featherflame away and turned to Palebird.

"We need to get back to the Clearing," he said decisively. "Hopefully Frogleap will be there." Palebird gave a weak nod. Heartstorm padded to Palebird's side and let Palebird lean on him. Together, they made their way agonisingly slowly towards the Clearing.

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Heartstorm let Palebird slip to the ground. They had reached the Clearing. Heartstorm scanned the Clearing. Reedstar, Waspnose and Sparkbelly were talking together on one side. Eelfrost was staring at Embergaze who was still lying on the ground. Heartstorm felt his stomach lurch. Was Embergaze.. dead? Reedstar turned around and spotted Heartstorm. They rushed towards him. Waspnose bent down next to Palebird.

"He needs a medicine cat!" Waspnose said worriedly.

"It's a mess," groaned Sparkbelly, looking horrified. "Everybody is scattered. We don't know what's happening. We could be winning. We could be losing."

"We've got to get as many cats on our side, to the Clearing," Reedstar said confidently. "And I've got to check on RiverClan." Waspnose nodded.

"I don't know where Falconstar is," he said softly.

"What happened to Embergaze?" Heartstorm asked Reedstar. Eelfrost was crouched over Embergaze, his eyes sad and tail twitching. "Is he going to be ok...?" Reedstar gave a sad sigh.

"I really hope so...," Reedstar murmured. "He's out cold." Heartstorm pushed past Sparkbelyl and trotted over to Eelfrost.

"He's going to be ok," Heartstorm told Eelfrost gently. He stared at Embergaze. He breathed slowly. Suddenly, Weaselscar burst into the Clearing. Reedstar was quick. He leapt at Weaselscar. They tumbled to the ground. Waspnose joined them. He grabbed Weaselscar's hind leg and sunk his teeth into them. Sparkbelly helped them. He lashed out at Weaselscar's stomach. Eelfrost didn't even seem interested. He was distant. Weaselscar howled and roared with pain. He thrashed around. Finally, Reedstar ordered everybody to let him go. They kept him corner though.

"What is your plan?" demanded Reedstar fiercely. Weaselscar growled and didn't say anything. Reedstar's right paw flashed out. Blood poured out of Weaselscar's cheek. He winced but didn't talk.

"We'll kill you!" snapped Waspnose. "I'll kill you!"

"Kill me!" panted Weaselscar. "Break the warrior code and *kill me*." Reedstar spat at him in disgust.

"Guard him," he ordered. Sparkbelly grabbed him and dragged him away. Weaselscar spat in Weaselscar's face then clawed at his back before storming off.

"We need to find the others," Reedstar said decisively. "Heartstorm, do you think you're well enough to get to RiverClan? Check on what's going on there. And on your way find any RiverClan or ThunderClan cat and tell them to get back to the Clearing and tell as many others as possible?"

"Yeah, I'll do it," nodded Heartstorm. He turned away from Eelfrost and pushed out of the Clearing once more. Heartstorm pushed his legs. They barely touched the cold ground. The wind whistled by Heartstorm. Suddenly, Heartstorm was flying through the air. Then his head hit the ground and his breath was knocked out of him. He gasped, lying on the ground, unable to move. Suddenly, he felt claws dig into his side. He moaned in pain and tried to roll away. His vision started to come back to him. He saw shadows flickering around him. Heartstorm tried to get up. Somebody slammed him down once more. Heartstorm felt the world around him leaving. He was going to die. He couldn't control anything anymore. Suddenly, the cold claws wrapped around his neck and Heartstorm felt a warm breath in his face.

"Heartstorm, I've been waiting a long time for this," hissed the voice. Heartstorm's mind snapped as he recognised it. Lionbreeze. Heartstorm struggled against him but to no avail. He didn't understand. He was a warrior. Lionbreeze was just a medicine cat. With attitude. But still, just a medicine cat.

"Oh, I'm not just a medicine cat," growled Lionbreeze into Heartstorm's ear. "I've been training. Training to fight. Oh I've

dreamt of this day."

"What have I ever... done... to you?" gasped Heartstorm, taking deep breaths. He had to get out. He couldn't die, he realised. He had a family. He had a Clan. He had to protect them.

"You changed out Clan," snarled Lionbreeze. "Not for the better." Heartstorm pushed up. Lionbreeze was taken by surprise and stumbled back. Not knowing how, Heartstorm went for a quick back kick. He hit Lionbreeze on the chest. Lionbreeze was sent sprawling. Heartstorm growled and lashed his tail then pounced onto Lionbreeze. He dug his claws into Lionbreeze's side and clawed.

"Still not as strong as a warrior, " muttered Heartstorm. Lionbreeze growled and twisted out of Heartstorm's grasp. With amazing flexibility, he turned his neck and bit into Heartstorm's back paw. Heartstorm felt his teeth sink into his flesh. Heartstorm tried to shake himself free but Lionbreeze wasn't letting go. Heartstorm claws at his face, at his stomach. Lionbreeze kept hold. Finally, Heartstorm let go of him and tried to wrench himself free. Every small movement let Lionbreeze's teeth sink deeper into Heartstorm's flesh. Heartstorm growled as pain flared through his leg.

"Kill me," growled Lionbreeze. "I don't care. As long as I cripple you for the rest of your life." Heartstorm roared in anger and bit into Lionbreeze's spine. Lionbreeze shuddered and Heartstorm felt his jaw slacken. Heartstorm staggered back, panting hard. His leg was bleeding. He tried moving it. It wouldn't work the way he would have liked it to. It felt..., heavy. Heartstorm shook himself. He'd be fine. The adrenaline kept the real pain away from him. Heartstorm stared at Lionbreeze. He didn't know what he had done. Lionbreeze's eyes were rolled up leaving his eyes blank and white. He trembled as if he was cold. His right paw looked locked into place. Heartstorm approached Lionbreeze carefully.

"What- what have you done?" croaked Lionbreeze. Heartstorm didn't know. He found himself hating to see his old Clanmate like that. He turned away in disgust. "Kill me! Kill me! Don't leave me like this.... I can't live like this...." Heartstorm turned around.

Lionbreeze was trembling on the floor but had managed to prop himself up a little. His right paw was still strongly blocked in the same disgusting position. Heartstorm frowned. Lionbreeze had attacked him first.

"Have mercy on me...," continued Lionbreeze, his voice hoarse and raspy. "I can't live like this." Heartstorm understood. Lionbreeze would never be able to walk again. His leg wasn't just blocked in that horrible position. Heartstorm had paralysed him. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to end Lionbreeze's agony. But he didn't want to take another cat's life. He didn't want to see another cat's limp and dead body. He turned away and started to walk away through the trampled grasses.

"Heartstorm!" snapped LIonbreeze, his voice stronger. "Don't do this..." Heartstorm didn't turn around.

"You brought this on to yourself," Heartstorm replied and slipped away. He headed towards RiverClan. He could hear some shuffling and shouting. There were yowls and hisses. But no cat appeared near Heartstorm. The sky was still covered in angry dark clouds. Heartstorm listened out for anymore ambushes. At every small noise, he stopped and pricked his ears. As he neared the river, he heard the grasses ruffle. A cat was running his way. Heartstorm crouched, ready to leap at any moment. A white cat burst into view. Heartstorm's muscles tightened and he got ready to leap but he recognised the cat. He stood up quickly. Snowfur, the ThunderClan medicine cat jumped back in fear and surprise. When he recognised Heartstorm, he sighed in relief. Snowfur had a cut on the back leg and a scratch across the cheek. He looked weary and tired but otherwise, he looked fine.

"Heartstorm," Snowfur said in relief.

"Snowfur!" Heartstorm exclaimed then lowered his voice. "don't rush about like that. An enemy could have heard you. You've got to get back to the Clearing! Somethings' happened to Embergaze and Palebird. If you see anybody from RiverClan or ThunderClan on your way there, tell them the same. Everybody is to meet at the Clearing." Snowfur gave a brief nod, looking overwhelmed. Heartstorm understood what he must be going through.

"Don't worry. You'll make it," assured Heartstorm.

"Thanks," Snowfur said, taking a deep breath. Heartstorm sped away. He pushed harder. He was reaching the border. He could feel it. Long grasses hit his face. They tried to trip him. They pushed at his sides. Finally, Heartstorm burst out of the grasses and the river rushed in front of him. His heart racing, Heartstorm sneaked towards the tunnel. The scents were mixed. Heartstorm wrinkled his nose. Then he crept into the tunnel and emerged back into RiverClan.

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Something about RiverClan wasn't the same. There was an eerie, deathly sense about it. Heartstorm crept prudently towards the cover of the trees. He heard some growls from far away. He picked up the pace. He made his way towards camp. He hoped Deerflame was alright in the nursery. He had to keep her safe as well. For Eelfrost. For the unborn kits. Finally, camp was in sight. Heartstorm approached it prudently. His eyes flickering around. It was suspicious to him that he had not seen a cat for now. The sound of fighting was nearer now but it didn't seem to come from camp. Taking a deep breath, Heartstorm ducked under some bramble bushes and into camp. He held his breath. Camp was deserted. Sticks, stones and bits of moss littered the floor. Heartstorm smelt the stink of WindClan in the air mixed with ShadowClan. RiverClan's scent was barely there anymore. Heartstorm let out a small growl. Suddenly, there was a snap. Heartstorm's eyes swept the place. He approached the noise. It had come from the stream. Heartstorm crouched and slowly crept down the small slope. He spotted something in one of the bushes. His eyes glued to the bush, Heartstorm neared it. He felt every muscle in his body tense. A small cry escaped the mouth of the cat hiding. Heartstorm sniffed. Over the smell of WindClan and ShadowClan, there was the soft scent of RiverClan, floating towards him. Heartstorm's brow furrowed and he stood up abruptly. The cat sniffling stopped suddenly and went silent.

"Who is it?" Heartstorm asked not too loud. There was no reply for a moment then the cat realised it was Heartstorm and snuck out of the bush. The cat was small and Heartstorm sighed in relief. It was Heatherpaw. She let out a sob and rushed to Heartstorm. He nuzzled her and gave her a comforting lick on the cheek.

"You're alright," Heartstorm whispered. "What happened? Where is everybody? Where-" Heartstorm stopped. He had to calm her down first. "Sit down. You're ok. You're going to be ok."

Heatherpaw gave a small trembling nod and lowered herself to the ground. Heartstorm glanced around to make sure there was no danger lurking about.

"Tell me what happened," Heartstorm said softly.

"Win- WindClan attacked us," whimpered Heatherpaw. "It was so confusing... I think somebody went to call ThunderClan. They came... but then ShadowClan cats came as well.. Thornstar told everybody who wasn't a warrior to follow him and flee. I was supposed to follow him... B-but I don't know... I was so confused... Brightp- Brightpaw stayed with me. Then this cat attacked us and she was so brave. She took him on. I didn't see what happened next because then there was this other ShadowClan cat who attacked me. I managed to fend myself. When he was distracted I- I hid... Then the fight just dispersed and they were gone. I think they're at the clearing from what I can hear..." Heartstorm let out a small breath. Brightpaw had taken on a warrior. He closed his eyes. He prayed that Brightpaw was ok.

"Alright. Don't be scared alright.., I've got to find them. I'm going to the clearing. You need to follow me. But you must listen to me, understand?" Heartstorm explained gently. Heatherpaw gave a weak nod.

"Good," Hearstrom said. He took a deep breath and led Heatherpaw out of camp. They headed towards the clearing. The fighting sounds were getting louder. Something cold touched Heartstorm's forehead. He jumped in surprise then looked up. It had started to rain. Cold raindrops dropped onto Heartstorm. Heatherpaw shivered next to him. They followed the river. The howls and snarls were louder. Heatherpaw looked as if she was going to pass out.

"Do you know where Thornstar brought the others?" Heartstorm asked her.

"I think to the abandoned Twoleg den," replied Heatherpaw. Heartstorm glanced in that direction, there didn't seem to be anything going on there.

"Do you think you can make it there?" Heartstorm asked. Heatherpaw was silent for a moment then nodded.

"Yeah, I can do it," Heatherpaw said, her voice shaking. Heartstorm gave her a proud look.

"I know you can do it," he told her firmly. "Go." Heatherpaw scurried away. Quickly, hoping Heatherpaw was going to be ok, Heartstorm ran towards the clearing. He ran to the edge of the trees and was greeted by chaos. Cats were fighting angrily everywhere. Heartstorm spotted a swirl of grey and knew it was Silverdrop. Without thinking, he rushed at the cat attacking his mate. The cat, a WindClan cat, fell back. Silverdrop clawed him in the face. The WindClan cat stumbled back and Silverdrop hit him hard in the chest. The cat fled. Silverdrop turned to Heartstorm. Heartstorm felt a beautiful warm wave of love and relief.

"Silverdrop," he whispered. "You're alright." Silverdrop smiled at him and licked him on the cheek.

"I'm glad you're ok too," she replied equally relieved. "We've got most things here under control now... There are quite a few injured."

"Right. We're gathering at the Clearing. Of the Gathering," Heartstorm said. Moorpelt limped towards them.

"Heartstorm!" he cried. "What happened to you? Are the others ok?"

"Embergaze... isn't too good," Heartstorm replied. "We're gathering at the Clearing of the Gathering."

"We're getting things here under control," Moorpelt assured Heartstorm. "We will get back to the Clearing once I can gather cats fit enough. Get back there. I think they'll need your help." Heartstorm nodded then turned to Silverdrop once more.

"Where's Brightpaw?" he asked.

"She went with Thornstar. She fought with this giant ShadowClan cat. She won. She wanted to stay but Thornstar and I

finally managed to get her to go hide with him," explained Silverdrop. "You take care of yourself, alright? I should go with you." Heartstorm glanced around. The fight seemed to be stopping. WindClan cats were retreating and a few ShadowClan cats had started to sneak away.

"No, stay here," Heartstorm said. He needed her to be safe. "I'll be back."

"Is Bumblepaw ok?" asked Silverdrop worriedly.

"I don't know," answered Heartstorm truthfully. Silverdrop bit her lip.

"But I'll find him. I'll make sure he's ok," Heartstorm told Silverdrop firmly. She gave him a brief nod. Heartstorm turned around and slipped out of the clearing. He made his way through the dark forest. His leg wasn't slowing him down. Heartstorm was so focused on getting back to Reedstar and finding Bumblepaw that he didn't hear the twig snap. Then claws dug into his sides. Heartstorm reared up in a flash, throwing his opponent off. He turned around to face his enemy but then something knocked him off the ground. Heartstorm was confused. How could a cat be so quick? Teeth sunk into Heartstorm's tail. He twisted around but was slammed to the ground. Claws clawed at Heartstorm's side. A cat bit into Heartstorm's ear. Heartstorm struggled against his two attackers. How could he had let this happen? He felt his strength seeping away. Then the cat biting into his tail released and the other cat was hauled away from him. Heartstorm jumped to his feet. Blacktail was battling the two ShadowClan cats. Heartstorm recognised them now. Spiderfur and Oakfall. Heartstorm jumped to Blacktail's side. Together they battled the ShadowClan cats. Heartstorm felt his former Clanmates' eyes boring into him. Their hatred clear. Finally, Blacktail and Heartstorm managed to make them realise they had no chance. They fled. Blacktail turned to Heartstorm.

"You ok?" She asked. Heartstorm nodded and mouthed thanks. "Are the others alright? In that clearing?" Blacktail nodded back to the clearing. Heartstorm nodded once more.

"Good," Blacktail said satisfied. "Can you walk?"

"Yeah," Heartstorm reassured her. He shook himself and felt renewed again. "Let's get back to Reedstar." Blacktail looked unsure but finally nodded. Together they made their way towards WindClan once more.

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They reached the Clearing and at once, Heartstorm knew something was wrong. His tail twitched and his ears pricked. He could hear yowls and cries of pain. Blacktail looked worried.

"How is ShadowClan and WindClan doing this?" she muttered. Together, they quickly made their way towards the Clearing. Heartstorm broke into the Clearing. ShadowClan cats were everywhere, fighting almost two to one. Heartstorm spotted Bumblepaw. His throat tightened. Bumblepaw was crouched in the shadows, a look of horror and helplessness on his face. Heartstorm leapt straight into battle. He barged into Sorrelclaw and dodged Roselight. He skidded to a halt near Bumblepaw.

"Bumblepaw, you need to get out of here," Heartstorm hissed. Skytail growled and leapt towards them. Heartstorm spat and with an angry growl, he threw her to the ground where Sparkbelly started to claw at her belly.

"I can't-" stammered Bumblepaw.

"You can. Get out. Get back to RiverClan. Get to the abandoned-" Heartstorm was interrupted by Bumblepaw.

"I can't..." he wailed then nodded to a dark pile on the otherside of the Clearing. Heartstorm squinted and realised it was a cat. Frogleap. Lying on the ground, still.

"Wh-what? Is he ok?" Heartstorm stammered, he couldn't find the words. Bumblepaw shook his head.

"ShadowClan killed him," whimpered Bumblepaw. Heartstorm looked down in sadness. He couldn't let that happen to Bumblepaw.

"You've got to get back," Heartstorm said firmly.

"I can't. I'm the only medicine cat now...," Bumblepaw said. "It's my duty." Heartstorm bit his tongue. Suddenly, there was a shriek. Heartstorm spun around. Reedstar was battling three cats. They had him pinned down. In a flash, Blacktail and Heartstorm headed for him. Heartstorm recognised Thistlenose. He grabbed Thistlenose by the scruff and sunk his teeth into his soft skin. He dragged Thistlenose off Reedstar's limp body. He clawed at him. Thistlenose twisted around and hissed angrily. He bit into Heartstorm's ear but Heartstorm threw him away. Waspnose leapt onto Thistlenose and pinned him down. Reedstar had managed to fend off Duskblaze and Blacktail had scared Sorrelclaw away. Heartstorm crouched near Reedstar. Reedstar's breathing was ragged. His eyes flickered up and down. His stomach was ripped open. Blood poured freely. ShadowClan cats had started to retreat. The few cats left were chased away. Heartstorm called to the other end of the Clearing.

"Bumblepaw! Come here!" he ordered. Bumblepaw came scurrying towards them. His eyes were wide in fear, horror and sadness. Heartstorm bent down their dying leader. He felt a deep pang of sadness. His stomach seemed to be liquid. Blacktail bent down next to Reedstar.

"Reedstar. You're going to be alright. Hold on," Blacktail murmured to him. Reedstar winced.

"Can you do something?" asked Heartstorm, almost begging. Bumblepaw looked hard at Reedstar's wound then shook his head slightly.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed. "I don't know... I can't." Heartstorm bit his tongue but gave a comforting lick to Bumblepaw.

"Reedstar, hold on, where's Snowfur?" Heartstorm asked. Falconstar had joined them, looking weary with terrible scars all over his body. He limped over to Reedstar.

"Snowfur was called away," Falconstar winced. Waspnose padded beside Falconstar, avoiding eye contact.

"I'm sorry," Falconstar said softly.

"Sparkbelly, Mistpool, go fetch Snowfur," ordered Waspnose. They both didn't know where he was but nodded and headed off. Blacktail looked as if she was about to break down. Heartstorm wanted to run away. Why was this happening? Bumblepaw looked sick. The other cats kept their distance respectively.

"Heartstorm...." Reedstar rasped.

"Don't waste your breath. We're going to get you Snowfur," Heartstorm murmured. The sudden silence was deafening. It was like something had taken over every cat. Like the world was already mourning.

"No Heartstorm... you... I make you... leader of RiverClan," Reedstar gagged then his eyes rolled into his head and he was still. The silence which followed was even more torturing. Heartstorm couldn't wrap his mind around what Reedstar had said. He couldn't wrap his mind around the death of their leader. RiverClan's leader. Blacktail gave a little sob then looked up at Heartstorm.

"That was his last wish," Blacktail said slowly. "That you be leader." She held no bitter jealousy in her voice, just sadness and emptiness. Her fur hung in wet clumps on her body. Heartstorm shook his head.

"What- I don't understand.. Why?" Heartstorm stammered almost to himself. Falconstar dipped his head then stepped towards Reedstar. Heartstorm's eyes were wet. His tears mingled with the rain.

"You walk with StarClan now. You were a great leader and warrior," Falconstar said gently. The noise of a cat crashing through the grasses was heard. Every head turned up. Heartstorm growled, ready to attack if it was an enemy. Bursting through the grasses was a slim white cat. Heartstorm recognised Cloudbreeze.

"Rainfeather... where's Frogleap? I need Frogleap now. It's Rainfeather," panted Cloudbreeze. His eyes landed on Reedstar. He gasped and took a step back. "No... is he? Reedstar...?" Heartstorm hung his head.

"Frogleap and Reedstar hunt with StarClan now," replied Falconstar sadly. Cloudbreeze didn't know what to say. Heartstorm snapped out of the trance first.

"What happened to Rainfeather?" asked Heartstorm.

"She's bleeding a lot and something's wrong with her foot," Cloudbreeze reported. "Bumblepaw... can you do anything?" Bumblepaw thought for a moment then gave a courageous nod.

"I'm going as well," Heartstorm decided swiftly. He wasn't letting Bumblepaw out of his sight.

"Reedstar appointed you new leader of RiverClan," Falconstar put in. "Ask one of your warriors to follow Bumblepaw, if you are so worried. We need you here." Heartstorm shook his head.

"I'm going," he said decisively. "Blacktail, you were the last deputy. You give the orders." Blacktail gave a small nod. Falconstar looked as if he was about to say something else but closed his mouth. Cloudbreeze flicked his tail and swivelled around. Bumblepaw followed him with Heartstorm at their heels. They swiftly ran through the long grasses. Cloudbreeze ran swiftly without hesitation. Bumblepaw pushed forward. His paws and legs ached and his whole body was on fire. But he was Rainfeather's only chance. He was the medicine cat of RiverClan. Bumblepaw grit his teeth. He had to do this. He had to make Frogleap proud. Heartstorm pounded after them. All his emotions were mixed. Adrenaline pumped through his veins.

"We're almost there," assured Cloudbreeze. The sky was still covered in angry clouds. The moon could not be seen. The rain poured harder. It drummed in a steady beat, pushing Heartstorm on. Heartstorm felt his paws sink into wet mud. He kept running. Bumblepaw was tiring. He hadn't been trained for this. His pelt was soaking and he was cold. Cloudbreeze ran determined. He had promised Rainfeather to get back with help. He wasn't going to break that promise. Heartstorm's wound on his leg ached. He wished he could curl up in a nest with his family and sleep. He wanted to wait out the storm. Suddenly, there was a loud roar and thunder growled in the sky. Heartstorm blinked as rain drops fell

into his eyes, blurring his vision. Then there was light. A bright light filled the sky. A large lightning bolt sliced through the sky. Then there was darkness once more. But the sounds were still there. The sky was grumbling and growling, as if it were angry as well. Heartstorm felt shivers run through his spine.

"Just past those trees," Cloudbreeze shouted. Heartstorm sighed in relief. They were almost there. Bumblepaw's breathing was hard but he was determined. Heartstorm slowed his pace. They were safe. They were ok. They were going to help Rainfeather. Heartstorm felt a small peace settle in him. A peace in the middle of a raging storm. Just then, there was an ear splitting screech and four cats burst out behind Heartstorm.

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"Run! Bumblepaw run!" yelled Heartstorm as his feet left the ground. He was rolled to the soft muddy ground. Water splashed into his eyes. Heartstorm winced. He felt claws dig into his side. He barely registered the pain. He arched his back and his attacker was flung off. The other cat gripped Heartstorm's tail and held him down but Heartstorm managed to twist away. Then he whirled around and faced his two attackers. Clawstar crouched in front of Heartstorm. His mouth was bloody. Bloody with Heartstorm's blood. His body rippled with muscled. He hadn't fought yet. He had been saving his energy for this moment. The other cat was Honeylight. Her eyes burned with determination. Heartstorm felt his stomach drop. Honeylight's eyes flickered over Heartstorm. He thought he saw something like sadness flash across her face.

"Hello Heartstorm," grinned Clawpelt. "Today is the day RiverClan will regret ever letting you join them. This is the day you regret ever betraying us." Honeylight didn't say anything. She avoided Heartstorm's eye contact. Coward, thought Heartstorm angrily. If she was going to fight him at least have the decency to like him in the eye.

"I'm glad I left you," growled Heartstorm. Honeylight finally met his eyes. Her gaze was calculating and cold. Memories came flooding back to Heartstorm. He remembered the time she had said she loved him. He bristled.

"I'm glad you left as well," Honeylight finally said. Clawstar suddenly leapt. Heartstorm was ready. He dodged and clawed Clawstar on the side. Honeylight pounced onto him. Heartstorm growled and bit into her leg. She snapped at his face but he quickly backed away. Then Clawstar was advancing on him once more. Heartstorm whirled around and kicked him on the side. Clawstar was unbalanced for a moment but the thrust his front paw out. Heartstorm stumbled back just as Honeylight swiped her front paw against Heartstorm's face. Blood spluttered everywhere. Heartstorm

ducked as Honeylight jumped at him. He bit into her tail and pulled with all his muscles. She let out a small groan of pain. Heartstorm had to let go though as Clawstar went for a quick back kick then a front paw blow. Heartstorm felt his head spin as Clawstar's paw connected to his head. Then Honeylight's weight was on him. Heartstorm collapsed to the ground and struggled. Clawstar grabbed him by the scruff while Honeylight dug her claws into Heartstorm's side. Heartstorm growled and bit into everything he could. Finally, he bit into Honeylight's ear. He closed his jaw as hard as he could then grind his teeth. He felt Honeylight's ear tear. Honeylight gave a horrible screech and Heartstorm felt weight lift off him. Heartstorm didn't have time to see what had happened to Honeylight. Clawstar shook Heartstorm by the scruff. Heartstorm wanted to give up. He felt his strength seeping away. The mud was tugging at his legs as if trying to bring him down. His body felt heavy.

"Heartstorm!" came a voice. Heartstorm's mind snapped back to the present. Bumblepaw. Bumblepaw. Heartstorm had to find Bumblepaw, he was in trouble. With an angry howl, Heartstorm twisted around and felt his skin tearing. He clawed out at Clawstar's face. Clawstar took a step back as blood poured out of his forehead. He shook himself and growled. His pelt hung at his sides, wet by sweat, blood and rain. Rain pelted the two cats. Heartstorm noticed at the corner of his eye, Honeylight. She trembling on the ground. Her ear looked messed up. Heartstorm didn't care. All he cared about was getting to Bumblepaw. With a new determination, Heartstorm lunged at Clawstar. They both fell to the ground. Heartstorm clawed at Clawstar's face while Clawstar used his strength to shove Heartstorm to the wet ground. Mud splashed everywhere. Heartstorm had to squint so rain wouldn't go into his eyes. Then he lashed out blindly. He caught Clawstar on the eye and Clawstar was forced to let go. Heartstorm didn't even think. He lashed out blindly. He ducked. He dodged. He bite. He scratched. Then Clawstar crouched low and lunged lower. Heartstorm hadn't been ready. Clawstar's teeth dug into Heartstorm's leg. He felt his flesh tearing. Heartstorm wailed out in agony. He threw Clawstar off. They turned to face each other once more. Heartstorm's chest was on fire. It burned with pain. But he had to keep going. He had to win this. He had to find Bumblepaw.

Bumblepaw. Heartstorm took a deep breath and threw himself at Clawstar. Clawstar bit into Heartstorm's shoulder and threw him to the ground. Heartstorm rolled on the wet ground. Mud stuck to his fur, weighing him down. The world spun but Heartstorm staggered to his feet. Clawstar growled, his teeth were stained with blood. He lashed his tail. Then he whirled around and kicked out his back legs. They connected to Heartstorm's chest. Heartstorm felt the wind be knocked out of him as he stumbled back. He gasped for breath. He was aware of Clawstar approaching. He took deep breaths, trying to get as much air as possible. Rain stung his eyes. Clawstar leapt and grabbed Heartstorm's scruff. He pushed him to the ground. Heartstorm felt his face against cold mud. He felt himself choking. He gagged as mud entered his mouth. He spat it out angrily. He twisted, trying to get out of Clawstar's grasp but to no avail. Clawstar held him down, grinning in victory.

"This is the best day of my life," Clawstar announced into Heartstorm's ear. Heartstorm snarled and shouted insults. "After this I'm going to find Bumblepaw and make sure he dies. Then I'll do the same with Silverdrop and Brightpaw. And perhaps even Eelfrost and Deerflame." The names of Heartstorm's closest friends and family coming from Clawstar's mouth stung. Heartstorm gasped in despair. He struggled weakly.

"Oh this is going to be fun," Clawstar spat into Heartstorm's face. Heartstorm waited for the final bite. He knew it was coming. And finally, he felt it coming. But it wasn't as he expected. Clawstar's weight was lifted off him. Heartstorm rolled to his feet. He spat out the mud from his mouth and shook himself. He saw Honeylight. He saw Clawstar. They were wrestling on the ground. Heartstorm's eyes were wide.

"Traitor!" screeched Clawstar. In a fit of rage, Clawstar flung Honeylight to the ground. She groaned in pain. Then he slashed her throat. Blood poured out. Her eyes stayed open. Rain dripped into them. Heart racing, Heartstorm leapt onto Clawstar's back. Clawstar buckled underneath him. Clawstar's reactiong was quick. He managed to get hold of Heartstorm's injured leg. He bit into it so hard. Heartstorm felt as if his leg was going to snap into half. Still, Clawstar drove his teeth into it, tugging and twisting. Heartstorm

let out a painful moan. Then Heartstorm stuck his claws into Clawstar's throat and scratched. Clawstar gurgled. He fell to the floor. Blood spilled out of his throat. He mumbled and gagged on the ground. He convulsed, his eyes rolling back into his head. Heartstorm had done what he had done to Honeylight.

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Heartstorm stumbled blindly towards where he thought Bumblepaw was. His leg dragged behind him. He tried to move it but it refused to do as he said. It twitched and sometimes made small movements but never what Heartstorm wanted. Still, Heartstorm pushed through the wet grasses. The rain beat down on him harshly. He heard some growls and snaps. Heartstorm felt the world blur around him. He staggered forward. Bumblepaw. He had to save Bumblepaw. He broke out of the tall grasses. At the top of the hill was Bumblepaw. Lightning flashed in the sky, illuminating the scene. Facing Bumblepaw was a small lean cat. Heartstorm recognised him immediately even if he had never seen him. Blizzardkit. Or Blizzardpaw. Goldenheart's kit. Stormpelt's son. Heartstorm's brother. Heartstorm's throat burned. He winced but continued to move forward. Bumblepaw had blood dripping down his sides and Blizzardpaw had a small scratch on his face. Heartstorm only knew one thing. He had to save his kit. He would fight Blizzardpaw to death. But he would not let Bumblepaw die. Bumblepaw paw's eyes flickered to Heartstorm. He looked shocked. Fear pulsed through him.

"Bumblepaw, run," croaked Heartstorm. He struggled forward but his leg had given away. He was dragging dead weight. His eyes were sharp but his whole body was weak.

"Oh hello big brother!" came Blizzardpaw's taunting voice.

"C-come and face me!" rasped Heartstorm angrily.

"Sorry, no can do. I'm going to kill Bumblepaw," grinned Blizzardpaw. Bumblepaw gave a small terrified squeak. His father was in a terrible state and he didn't know how to fight. he wanted to rush down and save his father but he knew that Blizzardpaw wouldn't let that happen. Heartstorm groaned in pain. But still he hauled himself forward. Then, his strength gave away. Heartstorm collapsed to the ground. His feet wouldn't move. His chest was on fire. His stomach and guts seemed twisted. Heartstorm turned his

head, trying to see Bumblepaw. He could see the two young cats perfectly. But he couldn't move. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't move. He could only lay there and watched. Blizzardkit smirked at Heartstorm.

"Not as strong they said," he laughed. Thunder roared in Heartstorm's ear. He willed himself to get up. Anything to save his son. But his body wasn't listening. He couldn't get off the mud. Bumblepaw gave a small growl and lashed his tail. He was soaked through and his bones could be seen poking out.

"Mmm, this is great. I get to kill you and your father can watch," said Blizzardpaw coldly. He lunged. Bumblepaw wasn't ready. And even if he was, he didn't know what to do. Bumblepaw was pushed to the ground. Blizzardpaw sunk his teeth into Bumblepaw's ear. Bumblepaw snarled and managed to throw Blizzardpaw off. Blizzardpaw circled Bumblepaw. Fear and adrenaline pumped through Bumblepaw's veins. Blizzardpaw lashed out his front paw. Bumblepaw managed to dodged at the last second but he lost balanced. Blizzardpaw pushed him to the ground and slashed his shoulder. Blood trickled out. Bumblepaw weakly rolled to his feet. He kept his eyes on Blizzardpaw but it was obvious who the stronger cat was. This time, when Blizzardpaw approached, Bumblepaw tried attacking as well. He jumped forward not very strongly and sunk his teeth into Blizzardpaw's shoulder. He had never done that before. it felt weird. Bumblepaw tasted blood on his mouth and felt the tendon moving. He grimaced and let go. Blizzardpaw shook it off as if was nothing. He was even smiling. He tripped Bumblepaw who rolled to the ground near Heartstorm. Then he took him by the scruff and dragged him back to the top of the hill. Bumblepaw struggled and lashed out. he caught Blizzardpaw on the side but only managed to grab some fur. Blizzardpaw shook Bumblepaw angrily. Finally, Bumblepaw managed to break free and stumble back. He kept his eyes on Blizzardpaw. He didn't know what to do. He had to save his father. He wanted to run away. Bumblepaw lashed out. He managed to give Blizzardpaw a small scratch on the cheek. Bumblepaw's sides were hurting and he felt as if he was going to pass out.

"Is this your best?" taunted Blizzardpaw. "I understand why

Stormpelt disowned Heartstorm. He didn't want to be related to mouse dung like you." Bumblepaw didn't answer. Heartstorm lurched forward in agony. He took a deep breath. Anger burned through him. The two apprentices leapt at each other and wrestled on the ground. All the time, Heartstorm could only watch. He felt something break in him. The two apprentices broke apart. Blizzardpaw had a nasty gnash on his back but Bumblepaw had blood pouring down his forehead and front paw. Blizzardpaw lunged.

"Run!" Heartstorm tried to scream but his words were lost in the storm. Bumblepaw didn't run. Instead, he kicked out his right foot. Blizzardpaw was surprised and stumbled slightly but then he was on top of Bumblepaw once more. Bumblepaw clawed at Blizzardpaw's stomach and finally rolled out of his reach. He staggered back. His breathing was ragged. Blizzardpaw swiped out his front paw and Bumblepaw fell to his knees. With a chuckle, Blizzardpaw grabbed Bumblepaw's ear and tugged. Bumblepaw felt his ear being ripped. He cried out in pain. Heartstorm let out a deep, sorrowful sob. Bumblepaw stumbled back, disorientated. His left ear hung limply on the side of his head. Sounds were different. They were mixed and blurred. Blizzardpaw didn't even care. He just shrugged.

"Oops," he said sarcastically. "Did I tear off your ear?" Bumblepaw gave out a pitiful wail. He wasn't strong enough. He knew it. He knew he wasn't made for fighting. He was a disappointment. Heartstorm was just there, lying almost dead. And Bumblepaw couldn't even help him.

"Crying for your mommy?" jeered Blizzardpaw. "Or your pathetic father, lying there watching me beat you up? Well guess what? You're alone. You're going to fight this battle all alone. And you're going to lose." Bumblepaw bit his lip. He let out a small sob. He couldn't do it. He wasn't made for this. He was going to die. And it would be his fault when Heartstorm died as well. Blizzardpaw made a lazy swipe. It caught Bumblepaw on the cheek. Blood spurted out. Blizzardpaw went for a front paw blow. It caught Bumblepaw on the head. He felt his head spinning. He tried to fight back. He meekly lunged. Blizzardpaw intercepted him. He hauled

him off and threw him to the ground. Bumblepaw rolled slightly down the slope then stopped. he stayed there motionless.

"Get up coward!" yelled Blizzardpaw over the angry rain. Bumblepaw slowly stood up. Blizzardpaw wasn't even trying anymore. He was like a predator playing with his prey. He was going to give Bumblepaw a slow death. With a powerful jump, Blizzardpaw threw himself into Bumblepaw. Bumblepaw gasped for breath. He felt claws dig into his shoulder. He felt his skin breaking. He felt his fur getting pulled away. Blizzardpaw rolled off Bumblepaw and let him get up. Bumblepaw staggered to his paws. He could barely get up. His world was swirling. His body weak.

"You're so boring," sighed BLizzardpaw. "It's like you're not even trying." Blizzardpaw yawned. Then mercilessly he lunged. Bumblepaw was pushed to the ground. Blizzardpaw pinned him down. Bumblepaw didn't even struggle. He knew it was over. there was no point in fighting. He gave out a low ragged breath.

"Sorry Heartstorm," he weeped softly. Blizzardpaw grabbed Bumblepaw's neck between his mouth. Then Blizzardpaw swiftly turned his neck. There was a snap. Heartstorm heard it ringing in his ears. Loud and clear. Blizzardpaw trotted off Bumblepaw. Bumblepaw lay there. His neck snapped back in an unnatural position. Heartstorm let out a low, terrible wail. Then he closed his eyes and let go.

Ch. 53

Echoing voices. They seemed so far away. The noises sharpened. The strong smells of herbs wafted to Heartstorm's nose. Something soft lay underneath him. He was in StarClan. Bumblepaw... Had Bumblepaw made it? Heartstorm's eyes flickered open. He saw some light. Some grey walls. A few colourful shapes. Heartstorm sniffed. He smelt warmth. He tried to move. The voices grew stronger. They felt nearer. Heartstorm blinked his eyes open but they wouldn't focus. Suddenly, a searing pain swept over him. He closed his eyes. His thoughts were muddled. He floated back to sleep.

Heartstorm forced his heavy eyes open. He stared into a beautiful ocean of blue. He smiled weakly. As he focused more, he realised he was staring into worried caring eyes. Silverdrop. What was Silverdrop doing in StarClan?

"Heartstorm," Silverdrop's voice was cool and calming like the trickle of a stream. "I love you." Silverdrop shifted and slipped into the nest beside Heartstorm. Heartstorm closed his eyes and purred. He wanted to stay like that forever. So he didn't move.

A cool breeze ruffled Heartstorm's fur. He yawned and rolled over. His body ached dully. Heartstorm felt slightly more awake. He blinked his eyes open. He was in a den. Moonlight streamed into the den from a small hole by the entrance. Herbs lined the floor and walls. Heartstorm was sprawled on a moss bed. Heartstorm sniffed. The smells were familiar. He frowned. The medicine cat den. But something was different. Heartstorm tried to pull memories. He shuddered as dark images replayed in his mind. A hollow cry escaped his lips as he remembered Bumblepaw. He curled up into a ball and shivered.

Morning had come. Heartstorm opened his eyes and sat up. His stomach growled angrily. He was thirsty. He was hungry. But he didn't want to get food. He didn't want to drink. He just wanted to

curl back up into a ball. Silverdrop slipped into the den. She rushed over to him. They pressed close to each other. Heartstorm closed his eyes and wrapped his tail around her. He felt as if he hadn't seen her for years. He took in her beautiful warmth and the feeling of safety.

"How are you feeling?" asked Silverdrop.

"O-ok," murmured Heartstorm. As he stared into Silverdrop's eyes, he knew something was wrong. "What happened?"

"I er...," Silverdrop's voice broke. "I'm gonna fetch some- j-j..." She rushed out, leaving Heartstorm alone. He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. He slowly lowered himself down to the ground. There was some shuffling and then another cat entered the den.

"Heartstorm," came a familiar voice. Blacktail. "It's me. And Snowfur."

"I've just come to check on you," Snowfur said. Heartstorm didn't question it. He let Snowfur look him up and down then pad out of the den. Blacktail stayed with Heartstorm.

"What happened?" asked Heartstorm hoarsely.

"We won," Blacktail said.

"Who died?" Heartstorm asked softly.

"Frogleap..., Rainfeather and er.. Bumblepaw," whispered Blacktail. The words didn't make sense. Heartstorm heard some rushing in his ears.

Heartstorm was prodded in the ribs.

"You've got to eat," Blacktail said firmly. Silverdrop sat behind her, a mouse in her mouth. Heartstorm sighed. Silverdrop dropped the mouse at Heartstorm's feet and took a small bite. He didn't savour it.

"I'm going to tell you everything that happened," Blacktail

said. "And you're going to listen. Alright? Because Reedstar chose you to lead RiverClan. And we need a leader more than ever now. Understand?" Heartstorm managed a feeble nod. He felt as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders. He wanted to run away. He wanted to find Bumblepaw. he wanted to bring Bumblepaw back.

"You've been hurt for about half a moon now," Blacktail said. "Snowfur has been helping us, since we don't have a medicine cat. We won the battle when one of the ShadowClan cats found Clawstar dead. WindClan retreated. We found you and brought you back. Bumblepaw was dead. We've been fixing camp and trying to get back food and get things back to normal. We're still mourning. Things aren't great. We don't have enough food." Heartstorm didn't process anything she was saying.

"Heartstorm, are you listening?" asked Silverdrop. Heartstorm shrugged and spat out the small bit fo food he had in his mouth.

"Brightpaw wants to see you," continued Silverdrop. "Can she come in?" Heartstorm shrugged once more. He felt empty. He felt cold. Blacktail turned around and padded out, leaving Heartstorm and Silverdrop alone.

"I'm letting her come in. Heartstorm, are you listening to me?" Silverdrop said firmly. Heartstorm nodded meekly. "Be strong." Silverdrop marched out and there was some talking by the medicine den entrance. Then Brightpaw burst into the medicine den. She padded towards Heartstorm, her head down, slightly nervously. Heartstorm felt a little flutter in his heart but he couldn't bring himself to stand up. Brightpaw mingled near him, not knowing what to do.

"Are you feeling better?" asked Brightpaw finally. Heartstorm wanted to sink into the ground. Instead, he nodded. Brightpaw finally couldn't help it. She rushed at him and sunk her face into his fur. Heartstorm let her. He didn't move but he soaked in the love. He closed his eyes.

"I love you," murmured Brightpaw softly, looking at her

paws. She backed away and slipped out of the den. Heartstorm looked up at the den entrance. He bit his tongue.

"I love you too," he whispered after her.

Ch. 54

Heartstorm slipped out of the medicine den for the first time since the battle. A strong wind blew. Cats turned their heads to Heartstorm. Then Eelfrost rushed over to him.

"Heartstorm!" he cried. Heartstorm was glad to see his best friend. Deerflame padded out of the crowd. Her stomach bulged and her fur was fluffy.

"I'm so glad you're feeling better," murmured Deerflame gladly. After greeting each cat from the Clan, Blacktail dragged Heartstorm off. He didn't feel like doing anything. He wanted to talk to Silverdrop more. They had spent a whole day talking in the medicine den but he wanted more. Nothing in the Clan seemed the same. All the cats seemed different somehow. Heartstorm wished things would go back to the way they were. Heartstorm and Blacktail padded into the leader's den. Heartstorm sniffed the air. It was familiar. The scent of Reedstar still lingered. Inside, Thornstar was waiting. He smiled sadly at Heartstorm.

"Good to see you're better," nodded Thornstar. Heartstorm gave a small smile.

" First thing's first. Heartstorm, you're to be leader," Blacktail said. Heartstorm didn't say anything. He didn't want to be leader. Why would Reedstar want him to be leader.

"Reedstar had his reasons," Thornstar said as if reading Heartstorm's mind. Heartstorm snorted.

"I don't want to be leader. Blacktail can be the leader," Heartstorm huffed. Thornstar gave him a serious look.

"You must respect what our former leader desired," Thornstar said firmly.

"But why would he say that?" Heartstorm sighed. "Maybe

he wasn't thinking straight." Thornstar raised an eyebrow but didn't answer.

"We don't have a medicine cat anymore," Blacktail interrupted. "ThunderClan and RiverClan are no longer allies. Only Snowfur has agreed to mentor one of our apprentices. This should be our immediate concern. Which apprentice?" Heartstorm's thoughts flickered painfully to Bumblepaw. Bumblepaw. His kit. Gone.

"We will talk to each of them," Thornstar said. "You must talk to each of them." Heartstorm had drifted off. "Heartstorm! listen. This concerns you. I understand that you are mourning. That you are sad. But you need to do what is good for the Clan as well." Heartstorm grunted but gave a brief nod. The meeting continued.

Heartstorm had finished talking to Daisypaw and Brightpaw. Every talk had pained him. Thinking about another apprentice replacing his son was a thought too painful to bear. Finally, Heatherpaw trotted over to him. The last apprentice. Brightpaw hadn't wanted to change. She'd also been mourning her brother. Daisypaw had shrugged but hadn't seemed interested. The whole Clan was a sloppy mess.

"Hi Heartstorm," said Heatherpaw meekly.

"Hi," replied Heartstorm without emotion. "We need a new medicine cat.. you know that already. Are you willing to be apprenticed by Snowfur?" Heartstorm didn't bother trying to explain it in a nicer or more alluring manner. He just told the bold reality of it.

"Actually er- I wanted to talk to you just about that. I do. I want to become a medicine cat apprentice. After what I saw in battle... I just don't know.... I don't think being a warrior is what is right for me," Heatherpaw said truthfully. Heartstorm's heart fluttered. He gave a small smile.

"That's great. We have a new medicine cat apprentice," he said. "I will tell Blacktail." he sighed in relief.

"And er... I'm sorry. About Bumblepaw," added Heatherpaw finally before slipping away. Heartstorm hung his head. Bumblepaw...

Silverdrop twirled her tail around Heartstorm's.

"I'm afraid for Brightpaw," admitted Silverdrop softly. Heartstorm sighed. He was too. He couldn't imagine what it would be like for her. To lose both of her siblings.

"Yeah... I'm not doing a great job at being her father," sighed Heartstorm.

"Don't say that," Silverdrop frowned. "It's hard for all of us."

"Yeah well I got to skip half a moon of it," huffed Heartstorm. "It must have been hard for both of you."

"Yeah, it was. But now you're back. And now it's the three of us," Silverdrop said.

"Mmmm," Heartstorm sniffed.

"You know if you're really not ready for this, I know Thornstar and Blacktail won't force you to do it," Silverdrop said. Heartstorm stared at the water trickling down the stream quietly.

"No, I owe it to the Clan," Heartstorm shook his head. He made up his mind. "I'll do it. I'll lead RiverClan."

Ch. 55

Heartstorm watched. He watched as Blizzardpaw snapped Bumblepaw's neck. He watched his own son die. And he couldn't do anything about it. He didn't move. He didn't even cry out. Heartstorm just stood there, doing nothing. Then Blizzardpaw looked up. His eyes were the same as Stormpelt's. He gave a small smile. His work was done. He would return to his mother and sister, happy with the news of his first kill. A kill which ShadowClan had been planning for a long time. Still Heartstorm didn't move. He just stared as Blizzardpaw disappeared into the grasses. And then Heartstorm padded forward. He ran to Bumblepaw's body and bent down. Dead. Bumblepaw was stone cold, wet and dead. It had happened. Silverdrop's dream had been true. Heartstorm cursed himself for not knowing sooner. Cursed himself for being the one responsible for his own son's death.

"Wake up." Silverdrop's swirling blue eyes stared down at Heartstorm. He shuddered and shot up in his nest. An owl hooted.

"It was just a dream," Silverdrop whispered. Just a dream. Heartstorm felt as if were more than that. He just nodded and curled back to sleep. He wondered if he'd have nightmares every night. Probably. But he would get used to them, like how Silverdrop got used to her. Plus, he deserved them, he had, after all, laid there doing nothing as his son had died.

Heartstorm padded to the camp entrance to meet Snowfur. He had just announced to the Clan that Heatherpaw was to be the next medicine cat apprentice. Blacktail was right behind him. Heartstorm was glad for her support.

"Hello Snowfur. Heatherpaw is willing to be you apprentice," Heartstorm said, dipping his head in respect. Snowfur gave a nod.

"Are you sure about this?" Snowfur asked Heatherpaw seriously. Heatherpaw gave a firm nod. Cloudbreeze and Acornheart stood nearby, looking proudly at their kit.

"then we will start immediately. We do not have much time," Snowfur said. Then they disappeared out of camp. Heartstorm turned back to Blacktail.

"Are all the patrols done?" he asked. Blacktail nodded.

"Our Clan is going back to normal," Blacktail told Heartstorm. "Which means you must become leader soon. And appoint a new deputy." Heartstorm wasn't sure if he was ready. but he'd made a promise. So he nodded.

"right...," he said.

"And I don't think I should be the deputy," added Blacktail. Heartstorm frowned.

"what? Why not? You've been great help!" exclaimed Heartstorm. Blacktail shook her head.

"Reedstar didn't think I was ready to lead. And I think... I think he's right," Blacktail said. "Don't argue with me. If you make me deputy, I will not accept." Heartstorm didn't know if she could do that.

"I-" Heartstorm started.

"let's not talk about this," Blacktail sighed. Heartstorm nodded.

RiverClan life was slowing slipping back to normal. Cats still mourned for their dead Clanmates and things were not the same as before but there was more prey, cats were more relaxed and death and worry had mostly left RiverClan. Heartstorm waited at the entrance of the apprentice den. He was going to lead RiverClan. He wanted to be the best leader he could. He wanted to help RiverClan. This was his way to do it. But he also wanted to be a good father. And he knew that he hadn't been a very good father the past moon. Brightpaw slipped out, yawning tiredly. She smiled when she spotted Heartstorm.

"Morning," she said.

"Good morning," smiled Heartstorm, padding beside her. "You don't have lessons today. I want to talk to you." Brightpaw shrugged and nodded. They walked out of camp. The air was cool and the sun had begun to rise. A few morning patrols were headed out. They greeted Brightpaw and Heartstorm when they passed. Heartstorm felt the warm soil underneath his paws and took deep breaths of the fresh air. Leaf-fall would arrive soon but Heartstorm wasn't going to worry until it came.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" asked Brightpaw.

"I don't know. Anything you'd like to talk about," Heartstorm said lightly. They walked in silence for a while. Brightpaw didn't know what to say. "I haven't been a very.. *present* father to you this past moon. It's been hard for me but I know it's also been hard for you. I should've been there for you. I want to be here for you from now on." Brightpaw smiled.

"Thanks," she said, touched. "I really miss him. I miss them. Bumblepaw and Sagekit. But they're together now. You know, in the apprentice den sometimes, when we both couldn't sleep, Bumblepaw and I would talk about Sagekit. You know, wonder what he's doing up there in StarClan..." They walked in silence once more. Heartstorm didn't know what to say. Emotion choked him. He finally realised what Brightheart had meant. She hadn't wanted Heartstorm to blame himself for Bumblepaw's death. But Heartstorm did. He did blame himself for watching his son die. For not being able to do anything about it. But there was nothing he could do now. He couldn't bring Bumblepaw back. So he was going to do what Bumblepaw would have wanted him to do. To help the Clan. To be there for Brightpaw. To keep living. Brightpaw and Heartstorm talked for a long time more. They walked by the river and stopped for a swim then even raced through the forest. By afternoon, Brightpaw was wearing a big smile and Heartstorm too.

Blacktail approached Heartstorm.

"It's time," she said. Heatherpaw trotted over to them, a bunch of herbs in her mouth.

"Here," she said. "For both of you." Heartstorm thanked her.

He chewed on the herbs. They were sour and strong but he gulped them down, making a weird face. Blacktail licked her lips without complain and they headed for the camp entrance. A few cats greeted them goodbye. Silverdrop trotted up to Heartstorm and licked him on the cheek.

"Be careful," she warned him lovingly.

"I will. See you later," Heartstorm assured her. Brightpaw ran up to him.

"Bye! I can't believe you're going to be Heartstar when you get back!" cried Brightpaw. Heartstorm chuckled. He felt a nervous twitch inside him.

"And you better be asleep by then," Heartstorm said seriously. Blacktail flicked her tail and Heartstorm followed her out. They made their way purposefully to WindClan border. There, they crossed the river by the tunnel. WindClan was silent, nobody disturbed the passing cats. Memories flood Heartstorm's brain. He spotted the hill. The hill where Bumblepaw had died. A rage bubbled in his stomach. Heartstorm felt the urge to run to ShadowClan and kill every cat who had hurt RiverClan. But he didn't. He kept his breathing under control and kept padding beside Blacktail calmly. The war was over. It was over. ShadowClan had gotten what they had demanded, a fight. And they had lost. A thought in Heartstorm's mind popped up. In a way, ShadowClan had still won. They had taken away some of the most important and precious things in Heartstorm's life.

"Don't dwell on the past. It cannot be changed," Blacktail told Heartstorm knowingly. "But the future... The future is yet in your power."

// Epilogue //

Heartstar stood proudly at the top of the High Rock in front of RiverClan. The sun was shining brightly and the birds sung. It was as if the world was rejoicing.

"Brightpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Heartstar asked, looking into Brightpaw's shining eyes. Silverdrop sat at the bottom of the High Rock, jittering with excitement and pride. Eelfrost grinned up at Brightpaw with just as much pride as Heartstar. Brightpaw looked down and caught Silverdrop's eye, then Eelfrost's. The deputy winked at her, urging her on. Her grin widened. She turned back to Heartstorm.

"I do," Brightpaw said loudly. "I promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend my Clan even at the cost of my life. I'll do it. In honour of Bumblepaw." Heartstar couldn't keep it in. He puffed out his chest and smiled with pride. Cats cheered and whooped. The sun seemed to shine brighter. It lit the whole of RiverClan. Brightpaw straightened up. She could imagine Bumblepaw up in StarClan, watching her, cheering her on. It gave her comfort and courage.

"Then by the powers of , I give you your warrior name. Brightpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Brightflame. StarClan honors your courage, determination and loyalty and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan," declared Heartstar. RiverClan erupted in cheer.

"Brightflame! Heathergaze! Daisystreak!" cheered the cats. Brightflame leapt down from the High Rock and cast a quick happy sideways glance at her former mentor. Eelfrost flicked his tail at her in approval. Silverdrop rushed to Brightflame's side and licked her fondly on the cheek. Heartstar watched as each warrior and medicine cat was greeted with joy and acceptance by the Clan. He leapt down from the High Rock and joined Eelfrost's side. They

joined in the joyful cheers of the Clan together. Heartstar had hesitated in appointing Eelfrost as deputy at first but he knew now he had made the right choice.

"She must have made you proud," grinned Eelfrost.

"Oh yes, I'm sure Bumblepaw is cheering from StarClan," agreed Heartstar. As the crowd broke up, Brightflame was joined by Deerflame who fussed over her. Two kits trotted up to Brightflame after Deerflame. One was a dark striped tabby kit with light eyes and the other had a beautiful chocolate brown coat.

"Brightflame!" cried the tabby kit. "Brightflame! Brightflame! You're a warrior now!"

"I know!" exclaimed Brightflame, bending down to the kit's height. "And one day, you'll be too, Bumblekit." Bumblekit puffed out his chest and squealed in delight. Eelfrost and Heartstorm joined their side.

"I don't want to wait that long," sighed the brown kit. Eelfrost chuckled and rolled his eyes good heartedly at his son.

"Well you're going to have to," Deerflame said firmly.

"Heartstar,? asked the brown kit. "Can I become a warrior now?"

"I'm afraid not Eaglekit," Heartstar told the small kit. Eaglekit huffed disappointedly.

"Don't worry. Time passes by quickly," Brightflame assured Eaglekit.

"Hey Brightflame!" called Daisystreak. Brightflame looked up. "Wanna go out for our first time as *warriors*?"

"You bet!" whooped Brightflame. Heartstar pressed against Silverdrop. They watched as their kit, now a warrior, streaked out of camp.

// Note + Feedback //

So yeah, after 7 months... the trilogy of Heartstar's rise is finally finished. I can't say I'm sad but I've been writing this for a long time and I don't really know what I'm going to do now... Maybe write another fanfiction? (who knows ;) ?)

Anyways, thanks to everybody who has read it and given feedback. Especially WarriorCats09, who literally commented on each chapter like 4 seconds after I post. Your feedback is always positive and helpful and it really did help me just keep writing the books because sometimes I just wanted to stop as I thought nobody would read it anyways. Also thanks to AztecStorm and Tigerstar2 for also reading most of the the books.

If you have any feedback on my writing, this book or any comments you'd like to say, please just comment here. I read all the comments.

Thanks a lot to the people who read all three books :)

Oooh..., also, if you like something funny, read my "The Worst Warrior Cats Fanfiction Ever"

Till next time :)

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